

Black Warrior

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I

The Wild Buffalo

"It's time we were moving." Gundar adjusted his turban—which, with a white cotton dhoti, or loincloth, made up his entire wardrobe—and rose to his feet.

"We shall have rain again before nightfall," said Bharak, joining his cousin and pointing to a blue-black mass of clouds piling along the misty rim of the plains far below.

Gundar nodded. It was a hot and dusty day during one of the few dry spells toward the end of the normally wet season of the southwest monsoon, a sure sign that before long the rains would end and the glorious days of the Indian autumn and winter would begin again. Raman Singh, Gundar's father, had taken advantage of the fine weather to send the two boys on an errand to a village in a nearby valley of the Ranjipur Hills. And they were on their way home, deep in the towering sal forest which stretched away on every side, clothing the low ridges of the foothills, and rising to the jungle-clad lower slopes of the snow-capped peaks which formed a part of the mighty Himalaya Mountains.

For a time the two were quiet, their eyes on the trail,

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and then, suddenly, the mid-morning silence was shattered by a crash of breaking undergrowth and a deep rumbling bellow. Gundar stopped in his tracks.

"What is it?" Bharak peered uneasily at the hillside above.

"It sounded like one of our village buffaloes," muttered Gundar. "But I never heard a buffalo bellow in that way before."

For a moment he hesitated, and then slipped quietly away through the bamboo thickets. Bharak followed him and slowly the boys threaded their way up the hillside, silent as only those born and bred in the jungle can be.

Again that hoarse, moaning rumble echoed through the trees. A troop of chattering grey langurs caught Gundar's eye. High in the branches, their attention was riveted on something below, and he knew that was where the noise came from.

With his heart in his mouth, Gundar edged forward again, hardly knowing what he would find. Ahead of him, the curtain of bamboo fell away and through a screen of low bushes he saw a wide, grassy glade. And there, in the middle of the sun-dappled clearing, with every mark on his scarred black hide clear in the brilliant light, stood the biggest bull either boy had ever seen.

"The wild ones," breathed Gundar. "The wild arna. . . ."

"They're so big," murmured Bharak in awe.

Gundar's gaze moved on over the loose half-circle of cows and young buffaloes, to the massive form of a second and younger bull. Once more the bellowing challenge reverberated in the still air, while dust and clumps of grass flew from under the pawing hoofs of both great beasts.

"Even the smallest cow is bigger than the bulls in our village herd." Bharak's voice rose on a note of admiration. "But, Gundar, we mustn't stay here. Suppose they see us?"

Gundar smiled. "We're safe enough," he declared. "They've got other things to think about."

The two boys watched as the arna bulls circled warily, sunlight gleaming on their wide black horns. The Old Warrior tossed his head and his eyes glowed a wicked crimson as he tore up the ground, trampling the grass to shreds. But still he waited. He could afford to be patient, as he was an old beast, well versed in the art of fighting. For many years he had been master of the herd, and he was full of confidence as he waited for the young upstart in front of him to make his challenge.

"Oh!" The exclamation was torn from Bharak as the younger bull moved with startling suddenness.

The Old Warrior wheeled, head lowered to meet the charge, and the clearing rang to the clash of horn on horn. The youngster was big and strong and for an instant the Old Warrior staggered under the smashing impact of the blow. But then he recovered and lurched forward, his great crescents of horns locked in those of his challenger.

Dust rose in clouds as the two swayed to and fro, neither giving an inch, until the Old Warrior slipped quickly aside, whipping his horns free with a flick of his muscular neck. Taken by surprise, the younger bull was only just able to evade a thrust which would have ripped him from shoulder to haunch. Even as it was, the Old Warrior's horn shone red with blood as he stepped back, poised for the charge which would bring about the youngster's final downfall.

The young bull was not to be vanquished so easily, however. Head down he met the charge and once more the pair wrestled back and forth across the glade, thrusting and lunging, each seeking an opening.

For more than an hour afterward, the forest echoed to the crash of horns and the enraged bellowing of the two

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great beasts, while Gundar and Bharak, silent and still, crouched in the undergrowth.

But then the Old Warrior's years began to take their toll. He was tiring fast and his head and shoulders dripped with blood from half a dozen wounds. His challenger was young, and what he lacked in experience he made up for in sheer strength and endurance.

Even as Gundar and Bharak watched, the battle reached its climax. Making a final effort the Old Warrior hurled himself forward.

But it was not to be. Perhaps because of his weariness, or maybe because he was still too sure of himself, the Old Warrior misjudged his charge. One hoof slipped on a rounded stone embedded in the trampled earth, and in the next instant he was down on his knees. With a triumphant bellow, the younger bull came thundering in, ripping and slashing.

The stab of his horns brought the Old Warrior staggering to his feet. And now the other young bulls of the herd were pounding across the clearing. In a moment they, too, were upon him in a goring, trampling, bellowing wave. The old bull rose to his feet again, but he was fighting for his very life as he backed away from these beasts whom he had sired, and over whom he had ruled for so long. Unconcerned with the fact that he was their own father, fired only by the battle and urge to "blood" their own horns on the vanquished bull, the youngsters came boring in from all sides.

"They're coming this way!"

"The tree! Get behind the tree!" gasped Gundar, pushing his cousin ahead of him.

He glanced back. Somehow the Old Warrior had wrenched free from that heaving maelstrom of black bodies and raking horns. The bamboo thicket offered scant shelter,

and he was plunging toward it with the entire herd behind him.

For a moment Gundar and Bharak, crouching in terror behind the stout grey sal trunk, were surrounded by trampling hoofs and blood-flecked horns. Then the wild buffaloes were gone and the boys crept from their hiding-place, gazing at the churned and blood-spattered earth of the glade.

Bharak sighed. "What a story we'll have to tell." His chest swelled with pride. "Even my father has never seen the wild arna fight."

"But we must hurry." Gundar was practical, as always. "Or we won't be back before dark."

That was Gundar's first sight of the arna. It was one he would always remember since, even among the villagers of those remote regions where the arna live, few people have ever set eyes on these rare wild buffaloes of India.

As Bharak had predicted, their news caused quite a stir in the village, and it was still the main topic of conversation some days later when the rains ended and Captain John Peters arrived in the valley. Captain Peters was, at the time, working for the Khandrapur Timber Corporation, and he was visiting the Ranjipur Hills on a tour of inspection of the great sal forests for which his company was responsible.

His car, a dusty and travel-stained Land-Rover, stood in the shade of a grove of mango trees at one end of the village street, and Bharak paused to admire it.

"Ah, what it would be to own such a machine," he sighed, comparing it with their own clumsy two-wheeled carts.

Gundar smiled. Bharak was never happier than when he could inspect something mechanical, and a car—or any other form of machine—was a rarity in the valleys of Ranjipur.

"It would be of little use up here in the forest, with only the one road down to Khandrapur," Gundar pointed out.

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"Maybe. But one day there'll be more roads," said Bharak. "My brother, Saran, says so."

Gundar nodded, but he was thinking of the many months it had taken to build that one raised dirt road. He could hardly remember it since, at the time, he had been little more than a baby. But he knew the people of his own and nearby villages had toiled for hours each day under the burning sun, with only the most primitive tools to help them, each village linking itself to the next, until eventually they reached the town of Khandrapur, fifty miles distant on the dusty plains at the foot of the hills.

"Saran is lucky," went on Bharak wistfully. "In the army there are many such machines. . . ."

"This is no time for dreaming," laughed Gundar. "Come on, Bharak, the buffaloes should be on their way by now."

They turned between the trees, heading along the banked earth walls of the village tank, which had been their one source of drinking water until a little over a year ago, when an official had come from Khandrapur to supervise the digging of a well. Since then the stagnant pond served only as a home for dancing hordes of insects and for the darting, glittering dragonflies which preyed on them.

Bharak threw wide the door of the long, thatched building which did service as a cattle shed and where the village buffaloes—some twenty animals—spent each night. His father, Kala Singh, was already inside.

"You're late," he said. "Busy dreaming about the car which brought Peters Sahib, no doubt."

He chuckled at the look of guilt on Bharak's face. "Such things are not for us," he declared soberly. "So be off with you."

Swiftly the two boys untethered the buffaloes, letting them stream out into the bright sunlight. It was their duty to

make sure the animals were taken to pasture, and since there were no fences they had to stay with the herd until it returned in the evening.

Again Bharak's eyes strayed longingly toward the Land-Rover. Gundar grinned, but said nothing as they followed the buffaloes along the rutted road between stone-built houses, and past a group of chattering, brightly-clad women and girls, with Gundar's mother and his sister, Naida, among them, who were at work milling wheat from their last harvest. Fork-tailed, brown pariah kites, those eternal inhabitants of every Indian town and village, perched on the thatched roofs or wheeled in lazy circles overhead.

"Hey, wait for me." A new voice cut in on Gundar's thoughts. "Dad said I could come with you today." Dave Peters pulled up, panting, and wiping a hand across his forehead. "Whew, it's hot."

"Will Peters Sahib be staying long in the village?" asked Bharak eagerly.

Dave shook his head. "No, worse luck. We have to get back to Khandrapur tomorrow." He looked at the two cousins with a hint of envy. "You chaps are lucky," he continued. "I wish I could live in a place like this, instead of having to go back to school in England."

"We both went to school in Khandrapur," Gundar told him proudly. "We were there for more than four years and learned to read and write in both Hindi and English."

Dave laughed. "I'll have to stick it for a lot more than four years before I'm through."

"Don't you like learning?" asked Bharak in surprise. He and Gundar had both thought it a privilege to attend school for even a few years. Not everyone in those small and remote hill villages had such a chance, and to be able to read and write was considered quite an achievement—it was

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something a good many of the adults had never accomplished.

"It's not learning I object to," said Dave. "It's the stuff we have to learn. We'll never make use of half of it. But never mind that," he went on, looking around eagerly, as this was his first visit to India. "One thing I really want to know about is the jungle, and how you live. I thought you were all farmers up here."

"So we are." Gundar looked puzzled.

"Then where are your animals?" Dave asked. "I haven't seen a single pig, or a sheep or goat anywhere in this part of the valley. Only buffaloes and a few dogs—and the dogs don't seem to belong to anyone in particular."

Gundar's face cleared. "That's true," he agreed. "The dogs don't really belong to anyone. They simply hang around our villages, living on what they can find. As for other animals, the people of these hills are mostly Hindus, and their religion forbids the eating of meat, so these animals you mention would be of no use to them."

"The buffaloes give milk and the bulls help with our work," said Bharak. "That's why they are so important."

"Aren't you and Gundar Hindus, too?"

"We are Sikhs," said Gundar proudly. "Our fathers came here many years ago. They were soldiers before that."

Dave nodded. He knew all about the bearded warrior race from the Punjab who made such wonderful soldiers, and he remembered that Gundar's father and Bharak's both wore bushy, untrimmed beards. He glanced curiously at a thin iron band which gleamed on Gundar's slim brown wrist.

"Why do you wear those bracelets?" he asked.

"They aren't bracelets," retorted Bharak scornfully. "All Sikhs wear them."

"They are called *kara*," Gundar told the English boy.

"And they are to remind us that a Sikh is always honest and never a thief."

"I see." Understanding dawned. "And those knives—are they a Sikh custom, too?"

"They are." Bharak's fingers closed over the ornate hilt of the short sword, or *kirpan*, which he and Gundar carried at their waists.

"By the way," Dave went on, his curiosity still not satisfied, "were those women we passed just now milling wheat with that big stone thing?"

"Of course. How else would they do it?" asked Gundar.

"Power-operated mills do all that sort of work back in England," Dave informed them.

"We have no machines, or the power to work them," replied Gundar. "So we must do everything ourselves."

"But how do you cultivate the soil, without tractors or horses?"

"A buffalo bull can do the work as well as any horse," said Gundar. "And what use would a tractor be in our hills?" He pointed to the terraced fields, each tiny plot—red-brown and newly cultivated, or green with vegetables—separated from the next one by a low, thick hedge, climbing away up the steep hillside beyond the twenty or so buildings which made up the village.

Dave pulled a face. He could imagine what might happen to a tractor working on that kind of a slope. Besides which, the fields were too small for modern machinery, which needs room to turn. Things must be pretty hard for these people, with only the bare necessities of life, he reflected soberly, and said as much.

"That's why so many of our young men join the army, or go down to the big cities in the plains to work," said Gundar. "But those who remain are happy here."

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For a time after that Dave said no more, following quietly in the wake of the buffaloes as they turned down a broad fire line, cut between the shady ranks of the sal forest to act as a barrier against any fire which might break out. And at last they came in sight of the wide waterside meadows flanking the River Khada.

"They'll be happy now," said Bharak, as the buffaloes lumbered past them and out into the reed-fringed shallows of a narrow backwater.

"Ah, this is the life," sighed Dave, as the three boys retreated into the shade of a massive banyan tree—a type of wild fig that had begun life perched on the branch of a forest giant. Later, roots growing down from the seedling fig had gradually strangled the host tree, which had long ago rotted away, leaving only the tangled mass of roots to support the banyan.

A coppersmith bird perched on one of the wide-spreading branches, its metallic tonking echoing in the still air. Gundar glanced up through the dangling ropes of the banyan's aerial roots, and pointed to the little green barbet with its crimson-banded breast, and the brightly patterned head jerkily nodding, first to one side, then the other, in time with each ringing note.

"Coppersmith is the right name for it," said Dave, smiling. "It sounds just like someone beating out metal with a hammer."

He sighed again, gazing up at the big leathery leaves. "I'll think of you two when I'm slaving away back at school."

"It's not always like this," declared Bharak. "At harvest time we bring the buffaloes to the river only during the hottest hours. In the morning and again in the evening we work in the fields with the others."

"And later the wheat must be threshed," added Gundar. "Then there is the tilling and planting—and when we have finished in our own fields we must help our friends."

"Everything is shared," continued Bharak. "Even the buffaloes, as we have only three bulls in the village and they must do everyone's work."

"That's why we must all help," went on Gundar, "because if the planting is late, then the harvest might be ruined and everyone would go hungry."

"It's been better since the road to Khandrapur was built, though," Bharak said. "Because when the wheat harvest or vegetable crops are good, we can sell any that we don't use in the market there. Then, even if the crops fail, we have money to buy food."

"But why weren't you able to sell your stuff before? Surely there's always been a market in Khandrapur?"

"Yes," replied Gundar. "But before the road was made our people had to travel on foot over the rough hill trails, and they could only take as much as they could carry. Besides, the fresh fruit and vegetables spoiled before they could get there. Now, with the buffaloes pulling our bullock carts, they carry much more and travel a lot faster."

"But not as fast as your car," said Bharak, his thoughts once again on the Land-Rover.

Gundar laughed. "Come on. Let's join the buffaloes."

He leaped to his feet and ran to the river, while Dave hesitated on the reed-fringed bank, his gaze sweeping out over the Khada, flowing swift and deep with the rain from the recently ended monsoon.

"Aren't you scared of crocodiles?" he asked. "Dad says there are plenty round here."

Bharak grinned. "There are. But the sort which live just here eat nothing except fish."

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"We'll show you," offered Gundar, turning away along the bank.

Dave followed eagerly. A few hundred yards farther along, where the river turned sharply in its course, a deep, clear pool had formed, overhung by thick jungle. It was here that Gundar paused, peering intently into the rippling water.

"There!" He pointed to the middle of the pool.

For a moment Dave could see nothing. Then a slight movement among the waving banners of water weeds caught his eye.

"Wow!" he gasped. "What a size! And just look at those jaws!"

"But it's quite harmless," Gundar assured him.

"I wouldn't want to take a chance on it." Dave glanced doubtfully at the gharial, as such it was, lying motionless among the weeds, its long, slender snout pointing upriver and just breaking the surface. "It must be twenty feet long—and all those teeth!" He shuddered.

Chuckling, Gundar and Bharak turned back toward the buffaloes. Farther along in the jungle something rustled the creepers high overhead. Gundar glanced up and the black face of a grey langur peered back at him. For a moment the two stared at each other and then the langur was gone, swinging away through the branches in great, soaring leaps, full of power and grace.

"Gundar, look!"

Bharak had moved on ahead while the others watched the langur, but now his exclamation brought them running to his side.

"The wild arna! The bull we saw in the forest!" Gundar's consternation matched that of his cousin.

"He'll see them! He'll see our buffaloes," groaned

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Bharak. "What can we do, Gundar?"

The Old Warrior himself answered Bharak's question. Head up, nostrils quivering, he had already spotted the village herd and, even as they watched, he broke into a lumbering gallop.

"He'll kill my father's bull!" Bharak's voice rose on a note of anguish. "Gundar, we must stop him!"

2

King of the Herd

Gundar did not reply. He was watching the battle-scarred arna. He would join the village buffaloes, Gundar knew, and almost certainly he would drive away the herd bull as he had tried to drive away his rival that day in the forest. And if Kala Singh's bull were to be killed or crippled in the encounter, the whole village would suffer. Gundar felt he was responsible, because if they had stayed with the buffaloes instead of wandering off to look at crocodiles, maybe the arna, being a wild beast, would not have ventured into the open.

But regrets were useless now. Even as they watched, the Old Warrior stopped and his hoarse, bellowing challenge rumbled over the lush green grass, while his forefoot raked the earth. A fight was inevitable as nothing could prevent the herd bull from accepting that challenge.

Bharak groaned again as he saw the two, since Kala Singh's bull, although big by comparison with the others of their herd, seemed puny beside the huge bulk of the wild arna.

Pulling himself together, Gundar took a firmer grip on

his staff and quietly moved forward, to Bharak's dismay.

"Gundar, come back! The wild one will kill us if we try to interfere."

"Bharak's right! Don't be a fool, Gundar," cut in Dave, but his words were almost drowned by another rumbling challenge from the Old Warrior, who, wasting no time, bored straight into the attack.

The herd bull wheeled to meet him and their horns locked. For a moment the smaller animal held his own, but then the superior weight of his rival made itself felt. Slowly but surely the Old Warrior forced him backward. He stumbled, and next instant was down on his knees.

Sidestepping swiftly, the wild bull disengaged his horns and prepared for the final thrust. But it did not come. Plucking up his courage, Gundar leaped forward, the long wooden staff hurtling from his hand, to fall with a clatter between the Old Warrior's forelegs.

Startled, the arna shied to one side, giving the herd bull a chance to regain his feet. Snorting and bellowing, the animal seized his chance and scrambled up, to stand splay-legged and panting. But his eyes still gleamed with the light of battle and for a moment he pawed the ground, his savagery matching that of the Old Warrior.

Gundar watched, horrified, fearing he would renew the contest. But as the arna advanced again he backed away, realizing he was beaten, and disappeared into the reed thickets at the river's edge.

The Old Warrior watched him go and then whirled about, his menacing bellow daring the other two bulls—one young and the other very old—to take up his challenge. Neither came forward and, satisfied that his conquest was complete, the wild arna quietly moved back into the meadows, dropping his head to graze.

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The village buffaloes followed him, and Dave looked at Gundar with a new respect. "What do we do now?" He kept his voice low.

Gundar shrugged. "There's nothing we can do, except to keep an eye on them."

"Maybe the wild one will leave before nightfall," murmured Bharak hopefully, his eyes on the Old Warrior. "If only my father's bull were his equal."

"He's a fine beast," said Gundar, stooping to retrieve his staff.

Finding an outcrop of rock, Bharak climbed to the top, searching anxiously for a sight of Kala Singh's bull. Gundar scrambled up beside him, shielding his eyes against the bright glare of the sun.

"I see him," announced Bharak, pointing.

The herd bull was a few hundred yards away, following slowly in the buffaloes' wake.

"We need have no worries about him," declared Gundar. "He won't stray far from the herd."

Dave was watching the arna as they climbed back down. "I don't like the look of him," he muttered.

"I don't think he'll bother us as long as we keep out of his way," said Gundar.

"He's got what he wants," added Bharak, "so he should be content for a while."

As they had hoped, the Old Warrior gave no more trouble, although he was obviously puzzled and irritated by the presence of the three boys. However, they were accepted by the rest of the herd and, finally, the wild bull decided that he, too, must tolerate them.

And so the hours passed, but when the time came for them to return to the village, the Old Warrior was still there, and he showed no signs of giving up his newly acquired herd.

Gundar looked at him thoughtfully. Somehow they had to get rid of him.

"Bharak, if you take your father's bull back along the fire line toward the village, the rest may follow," he said, rather doubtfully. "He knows you well, so there'll be no trouble."

"And if the wild one interferes?" Bharak was apprehensive.

Gundar shrugged. "We'll have to wait and see."

Bharak slipped away, taking Dave with him. The Old Warrior watched them go, and Gundar waited until he dropped his head again to graze before edging in toward the herd. The village buffaloes saw him coming and began to move toward the fire line from sheer force of habit, feeding as they went. The Old Warrior ambled beside them. He was no longer bothered by the boys and took little notice when Gundar came between him and the herd.

But when at last the fringe of the sal forest came in sight, Gundar began to grow uneasy. He could see Bharak and Dave farther ahead, and the herd bull was with them. An angry flicker of crimson showed for a moment in the Old Warrior's eyes as he paused, digging deep furrows in the damp earth of the fire line.

Gundar stopped, fighting down an overwhelming urge to turn and run. He felt very small beside the massive black bulk of the wild bull, and the thick crescents of the Old Warrior's horns looked terrifying at such close range. He wished the herd would move faster, but the buffaloes were in no hurry.

Bharak, Dave and the herd bull disappeared around a bend and the wild arna relaxed. Gundar moved farther back. The Old Warrior followed, but the fury had gone from his eyes since his rival had vanished from sight.

For almost an hour afterward the wild one followed in

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the wake of the herd. The end of the fire line came in sight, with Bharak and the herd bull turning out of the trees ahead. The Old Warrior snorted, his anger rising again. But even as he paused a new sound brought him wheeling about.

The shrill barking of dogs had greeted Bharak's appearance in the village, and they were rushing into the fire line to welcome Gundar and the rest of the herd. The domestic buffaloes paid no attention to the pack, as they had been reared among them and were accustomed to them. But to the Old Warrior dogs spelled trouble. The wild dogs of the forest were more to be feared than even the tiger, and he knew that similar creatures were kept by that other great enemy of the wild arna—Man.

With a last defiant toss of his head, the Old Warrior turned and trotted away into the grey shadows of the sal forest. And, with a sigh of relief, Gundar brought the dogs to heel and walked on toward the village.

That was the last Gundar and Bharak saw of the great wild bull. Captain Peters left the valley, and Dave returned to his school in England. The cool, dry season came and went, giving way to the warmer days of spring. In the jungle thickets, between and around the great sal forests, trees and entwining creepers alike burst into a mass of bloom.

The hot weather came again, and the wheat harvest. An air of expectancy hung over the village as the time drew near for the birth of a calf to one of Raman Singh's cows. And because he loved animals, Gundar was particularly affected. A new calf was always the cause of much rejoicing among the hill people, especially in a family as humble as that of his father.

The day of the great event dawned at last, bright and

clear, though storm clouds massing on the western horizon gave promise of rain to come. It was already hot, with the drowsy hum of insects loud in the heavy air, as Gundar and his cousin walked slowly along the tethered ranks of the buffaloes.

Raman Singh was still in the village, but he was preparing for a long day's work in the fields and he frowned as he saw the two boys.

"Have you no work to do?" he demanded, striding across to the shed. "The little one will be well cared for," he added in a softer tone.

"Your sister and I will be here," put in Gundar's mother, bustling toward them.

"It will be born before nightfall," muttered Gundar.

His mother smiled. "It's not the first to be born to our village herd—and it won't be the last. But now, Gundar, the other buffaloes should be on their way to the meadows."

Raman Singh nodded. "Too much time has been wasted already," he declared.

With bowed head, Gundar untied the last of the buffaloes, but he looked with longing eyes at the single cow, still tethered in her place. The cow, too, appeared to be upset by the departure of her companions. She was tugging at her rope as she watched them, and her long, mournful bellow followed them down the dusty road.

Out in the open, Bharak waved a greeting to his mother who was already winnowing wheat, her sari and head shawl smothered in dust as the chaff blew back from the grain in her wide, shallow basket.

But that day Gundar was silent, and oblivious to his cousin's chatter. And he was still lost in thought when they came out into the tawny, shoulder-high grass of the meadows.

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"The grass will be greener down by the mayeng tree," he murmured. "It would be better to go there."

Bharak nodded. "I'll be glad when the summer is over," he declared. "I don't like this weather any more than the buffaloes do."

Gundar said nothing. No one liked the hot, sultry days at the start of the wet season, when the forest and jungle were like a steam bath under the burning sun between periods of pouring rain. But it was not the weather that bothered him now.

The boys reached the mayeng tree and stopped under the deep shade of its huge round leaves, while the buffaloes went on through the muddy reed beds and into the deeper pools of the Khada, still flowing sluggish and low. Here, being water-loving animals, the herd would remain through the hottest hours, and this was the time Gundar liked best of all. He loved to watch the wild life of the jungle and riverside and to look at the towering, cloud-veiled peaks of the far distant Himalayas.

But today he was not much interested in the life of the creatures around him. His mind was still on the new little buffalo about to be born. What would it be like? Big, like the herd bull? Or small like its mother? They badly needed a bull, as his father possessed only two cows, and of the three bulls in the village one was an old beast, well past his prime. Gundar knew that soon the time must come when he could no longer work.

"I wonder—will it be a bull calf?" he murmured to Bharak.

3

The Bull Calf

While Gundar dreamed, the heat increased as the sun reached and passed its zenith, making the boys glad of the thick, spreading canopy of foliage. Out in the open meadow and in the depths of the jungle, silence reigned, except for the drone of flying insects—an undertone punctuated by the ever-present chirping of crickets and the cheerful shrilling of cicadas.

Farther upriver Chandra Lal, the village headman, and his son beached their dugout canoe and gathered their nets, while a pale-headed fish eagle—a visitor from the plains—wheeled over their heads, its harsh screams ringing through the Khada's broad valley. The rain came and went and the sun broke through again, glistening on the feathery, water-spangled plumes of grass and the dripping branches of the mayeng tree. The chorus of crickets and the drowsy hum of insects, silenced by the downpour, began again.

The two fishermen had long since departed and the eagle had turned its attention to a big, black-and-white pied kingfisher, pestering the life out of the smaller bird. Even as Gundar watched the kingfisher gave up the unequal struggle.

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The fish it had caught fell in a glittering arc and the eagle, with a flick of its wide, powerful wings, swooped after it, caught it and zoomed skyward again, leaving the disgruntled kingfisher to seek out new and more profitable feeding grounds.

A hot breeze stirred the boughs overhead, and the top of the mayeng tree turned into a crown of silver as the grey undersides of its leaves turned uppermost. Stillness returned and Gundar looked hopefully at the brassy dome of the sky between the network of branches above.

Bharak smiled as he saw the glance. "The buffaloes are coming in from the river," he said.

Gundar started to his feet, striding down through the scrub thickets to the muddy water's edge.

"We can't take them back yet, Gundar," protested Bharak. "It's too early. Our fathers will be angry."

"We can move them along the river and back by the banyan tree," retorted Gundar. "They'll have better grazing, and it will be almost nightfall before we reach the village. Besides," he added seriously, "it's better to keep on the move at a time like this. The hours pass more quickly if one has something to do."

Bharak shrugged. "So be it," he said, and turned toward the buffaloes, lowing and contented as they ambled from the reed thickets, with wet mud plastered thickly over their hides to give some protection from the flies which hovered in buzzing swarms along the sunlit fringe of the forest.

The flock of white cattle egrets, which had been with the herd since early morning, moved with them, parading cheekily between the animals' hoofs and perching on their broad backs, probing the thick hide for the ticks which made up a large part of the birds' diet.

The rain started once more. A soft, light drizzle this time,

The Bull Calf

pleasant to both man and beast since it brought some relief from the sultry heat. For Gundar, however, what was left of the afternoon seemed endless. The buffaloes, grazing ponderously up through the plumed grass of the riverside meadows, seemed to him to be scarcely moving at all. The new calf should have been born by now, he thought, and he urged the animals to greater speed. Bharak glanced at him in amusement, but said nothing.

Sunset was still half an hour away when they reached the end of the fire line and turned along the dusty path leading into the village. Several people—men, women and children—were gathered near the entrance of the cattle shed, and Gundar noted with surprise that both his and Bharak's father were among the crowd. Evidently he and his cousin were not the only ones to return early from work that day.

Raman Singh turned as he heard the lowing of the buffaloes and the drumming of their hoofs, and Gundar hesitated, wondering if his father would be angry with him for returning so early. The older man's face was wreathed in smiles, however, and a moment later a woman in a bright cotton sari came pushing forward from inside the shed. Gundar recognized his mother and turned eagerly toward her.

"The calf is born," she told him. "A little bull—and finer and bigger than any I've seen before."

"He's a beautiful animal," broke in his sister, Naida, her eyes alight with excitement. "A prince among buffaloes."

His heart thumping, Gundar ran forward as Naida darted back into the building.

"See, Gundar," she called. "Look at his size!"

Gundar stopped, and then stepped forward slowly, almost reverently, his wide, dark eyes fixed on the long-legged, ungainly little creature standing shakily by its mother's side.

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"The wild one," he breathed, as a sudden thought came to him. "The wild arna. . . ."

And memories of that day in the forest many months before came flooding back—the day on which he and Bharak had seen the fight of the great wild bulls, and the Old Warrior had been driven from his herd.

Gundar remembered it all as he knelt beside the little calf in the shadows of the cattle shed. And he remembered, too, how, many days later, when he and Bharak and Dave Peters were down by the river, that same Old Warrior had joined the village buffaloes. Ever since that time he had dreamed of owning such an animal. And it seemed that his wish had been granted, as surely the little one beside him must have been sired by the great wild bull. Nothing else could account for his size and his appearance on the day of his birth.

Breaking off, Gundar ran back to the open doorway, where the people of the village were still clustered.

"Oh, Father! Mother! He'll be the biggest and greatest buffalo our village has known." His voice rose on a note of excitement. "He'll become leader of the herd, as did the wild one that day out in the forest."

Raman Singh smiled, but his eyes held a gleam of pleasure, since if this animal was, in fact, the calf of a wild buffalo then it would grow into a bull to be proud of—a bull such as few hillmen had ever had the thrill of owning. Such a beast would bring prestige not only to himself and his family, but to the whole village.

"Will you give him a name?" asked Naida.

Gundar hesitated. "We'll call him Khan," he said. "Truly, he'll be a king of his kind."

The birth of the calf caused a sensation in the small hill village, but work had to go on and, at dawn next day, the two boys were already on their way out to pasture with the

herd. The morning was hot and sultry, and, as the day wore on, the clouds which had been threatening along the southern and western horizons began to roll forward, blotting out the wide expanse of the plains behind a silvery curtain of rain.

That same night a violent thunderstorm, so typical of the monsoon season, broke over the valley of the Khada. For more than an hour, Gundar lay in the stifling heat of his father's house, listening to the crash of thunder and the hissing roar of rain cascading across the thatched roof overhead.

At last he could stand it no longer. Fearful for the safety of his beloved buffaloes, he slipped out into the deluge. The cattle shed was at the other side of the village and he turned toward it, slipping and stumbling on the rough path, already ankle-deep in mud as the pouring rain bit into its hard trodden surface. The sudden glare of lightning split the darkness as he reached the building and went inside, shaking the rain from his shoulders.

The buffaloes were restless as Gundar expected, moving uneasily in their places, their nervous bellowing filling the shed between each shattering crash of thunder. Talking quietly, soothingly, he moved along their ranks and at the sound of his voice they became calmer, although one or two still tugged at their ropes.

Gundar paused, smiling, as another flash revealed the silvery-grey form of a mongoose scampering swiftly across the floor, to disappear in the shadows. The little animal was apparently seeking shelter from the storm and it was welcome, as its presence would keep the area free of snakes, which are the natural prey of the mongoose.

With thoughts of the new bull calf filling his mind, Gundar made his way to its side. He was still kneeling there

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when Bharak burst in a few minutes later, with water streaming down his chest and soaking the white cloth of his dhoti.

The mongoose appeared again, its sharp nose twitching inquisitively as it gazed around at the tethered buffaloes, before scurrying away on business of its own.

"He'll be a fine beast," observed Bharak, stooping to fondle the quivering calf as it cowered beside its mother. "Bigger by far than my father's bull," he added with a touch of envy.

Gundar nodded, his lean features alight with joy and pride as he glanced up at the thatched roof, against which the rain pounded more furiously with every passing minute.

Throughout most of that night the two boys remained in the cattle shed, soothing and calming the restless animals, while outside the storm raged with unabated fury until the early hours of the morning.

In this way the weeks of the southwest monsoon went by, weeks of stifling heat and drenching rainstorms. And as time passed, the bull calf began to fulfil the promise he had shown. Another little buffalo had been born a few days later, but Gundar's calf was so big and strong that he completely eclipsed the later arrival.

He had become the pride of the village, admired by everyone. But then, one day after the monsoon rains had ended, something happened which drove the young bull into second place in the minds of the villagers. It was one of those bright, sunny, near-perfect late autumn days. The weather was dry and the sky a serene and cloudless blue, with just a faint suggestion of a nip in the evening air as Gundar and Bharak, each with a bundle of newly-gathered firewood slung over his shoulders, brought the buffaloes back from their riverside pastures. They were in no particular hurry,

as the forest at that time of year was a very pleasant place and the animals, scattered along the edges of the fire line, were grazing among the lush growth of herbage there. Bird-song filled the air, even at this late season, and the shrill undertone of insects mingled with the furtive rustlings and squeaks of jungle creatures awakening to life as the sun slid swiftly down toward the far distant rim of the plains.

Then, quite suddenly, the shrill barking of a chital—the little spotted deer of the forest glades and grasslands—rang through the still air, silencing for a moment all other sounds of bird and beast. Gundar stopped, glancing toward the sound. Chital barked that way only when a tiger or a panther came near. The buffaloes, too, were beginning to circle uneasily and he wondered whether they had scented the big cat.

"It's ahead of us," he murmured to Bharak.

His cousin nodded. "Perhaps we should wait until it has passed."

4

Tiger Warning

Neither of the boys showed any real fear at that moment, as they were used to the sight and sound of the great cats. Leopards were plentiful in the district and a tiger had roamed the surrounding countryside for several years, but on no occasion had any of these beasts of prey molested either the villagers or their animals.

Feeling confident of his safety, Gundar walked another few paces along the fire line, to the point where a wide nullah cut across it at right angles. The steep sides of the ravine were banked high with debris, accumulated during the recently ended rains, while its sandy floor was littered with stones. At the far end he saw the russet, white-dappled forms of the chital. Three hinds, each with a fawn, stood at the side of the nullah, all facing upwind with their ears pricked toward the slope of the forest.

For a few moments longer the hinds remained, turning first one way, then the other, as though undecided which direction to take. One of them barked again—a shrill call of alarm—and then they were gone, bounding out into the fire line and away toward the river, the drumming of their

hoofs lost under the bellowing uproar of the buffaloes. But a little flock of jungle babblers had perched in a tree near the great cat and their harsh, squeaking calls continued the warning started by the chital. The cat, whether tiger or leopard, had not moved.

Gundar frowned. "What can it be doing?" he wondered.

Obviously it was not hunting, as the hoarse voices of the babblers would ensure that no living creature passed that way. Then why stop in that particular place?

Gundar was puzzled, but the buffaloes were growing increasingly restless and he feared they might stampede if they were held too long in one place.

"It will soon be dark," he said to Bharak. "They'll be more frightened than ever then."

"And if any of them should stray from the herd we'll have difficulty finding them," Bharak replied.

"Maybe that's what the cat wants," said Gundar thoughtfully. "A single buffalo, even a fully grown one, would be easy to kill at night."

He gripped his staff more firmly. "We must go on," Gundar decided, and guided the buffaloes across to the far side of the fire line.

The raucous voices of the babblers had been joined now by the chattering calls of a laughing thrush. The birds were still in the same place, a few yards above the nullah, and both boys kept a wary eye on the spot as the buffaloes straggled past, keeping the full width of the open fire line between themselves and the big cat.

Nothing happened and Gundar breathed a deep sigh of relief as the ravine was left behind and the alarm calls faded into the distance. Being in charge of the village herd was a responsibility which weighed heavily on his young shoulders, and he took the job very seriously since the

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buffaloes were the hill people's most treasured possessions.

Later, with the animals safely tethered in their shed, Gundar told his father of the incident. Bharak's father, Kala Singh, who was the village shikari, or hunter, was also present and he plucked thoughtfully at his beard as the boys explained what had happened.

"You saw no sign of the beast?" he asked at length.

"No, Uncle," replied Gundar. "It seemed almost as though it were watching us."

"Gundar thought maybe it was trying to stampede the herd," put in Bharak. "Could that be so, Father?"

"In the wild nothing is impossible," replied the hunter, since he knew from long experience that no animal conforms to any particular set of rules. "But if that were so I would have expected it to demonstrate, or make some sound to startle and scatter the buffaloes. It didn't do this?"

"No, Uncle." Gundar shook his head. "We don't know whether it was the Striped One or a panther." He took care not to mention the tiger by name, because to do so would surely call down the wrath of the jungle gods.

Raman Singh frowned. "It could be a mere chance that it stopped by the nullah," he suggested.

"I think you may be right," nodded Kala Singh.

And so the matter was left. But when the same thing happened again two days later, the shikari began to have doubts on this score and Chandra Lal, the village headman, was brought into the discussion.

"I think it must be the Striped One," declared Kala Singh, "but it seems strange that it should happen again."

"Perhaps it would be just as well to bring the buffaloes home a little earlier than usual," suggested Chandra Lal, cautiously. "The Striped One is a clever beast. Who knows what he may be planning."

"And yet he has never molested us," murmured Raman Singh. "Many times I've seen him while working in the fields and the jungle, and always he has passed on his way with no more than a glance."

"But he's growing old," pointed out Kala Singh, remembering how long the tiger had lived in that district. "And when the Striped Ones grow old they are less able to seek out their natural prey. Sometimes then they will take beasts from a village herd."

"I knew of one such, many years ago," said Chandra Lal. "It took many valuable animals during the last few months of its life."

"The Striped One has never been seen near the village during the hours of full daylight," Kala Singh reminded them. "He appears only in the very early morning or in the evening, toward dusk. If the buffaloes are back in the village before that time, they should come to no harm."

Raman Singh turned to Gundar and Bharak, both of whom had been listening quietly to the discussion. "Remember what we have said," he told them, "and have the herd back here a full hour before nightfall until this thing is settled."

"We won't forget, Father," Gundar assured him.

And for nearly a month afterward the two boys kept to this plan, making sure the buffaloes were back in their shed a good hour before sunset. But, during that time, they neither saw nor heard anything more of the tiger and gradually the incident was forgotten. The people of the village were again far more interested in the progress of the new bull calf, son of the Old Warrior. And besides, the early return of the herd meant more work for the women. Cutting grass to provide extra fodder for those animals which toiled all day in the fields was a hard enough task, but now, with

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the whole of the herd losing a full hour's grazing in the river meadows, it had become really formidable. The women had plenty of other work to do and little time for extra chores, and so, gradually, the rule was relaxed and before long the buffaloes were returning at their usual hour.

For a time all went well and Gundar had almost forgotten the tiger. The bull calf, although only a few months old, had already grown into a splendid beast and showed every sign of one day equalling or even surpassing the Old Warrior, his father. Thoughts of his future filled Gundar's mind and he spent all his spare time with the calf. The two were firm friends and the little bull was rarely far from his master's side, except at night, and during the midday hours when the sun was at its height and the buffaloes retired to their deep mud wallows in the River Khada.

The days slid past, wonderful days of the Indian winter, with cloudless blue skies and bright sunshine, tempered by the cool mountain breezes. But, although the wild life of jungle and river was at its quietest during this season, the two boys still found much to interest them. Often they lingered at the river's edge and one evening, while walking carelessly beside the grazing herd, Bharak almost stepped on a cobra. It was hidden among the rocks of a low outcrop and as he approached, it came erect, the menacing spread of its hood silhouetted against the sky. Bharak saw it at once and leaped back, but the snake did not strike. Instead it remained poised, swaying gently from side to side, its gaze fixed on something among the rocks which the boys could not see.

Gundar pulled a face. "We must remember to stay clear of those rocks in future."

He spoke casually as such an experience was not uncommon. The sight which followed was less frequent, however,

as almost immediately a sleek form slipped out from behind the rocks, its bright eyes fixed on the cobra. The snake hissed, its rhythmically swaying head turning to follow the mongoose while its forked tongue flickered between gleaming poison fangs. But the mongoose was not troubled. It merely trotted around to the other side, its bushy tail waving in impudent contempt.

Gundar could not suppress a smile of amusement. He guessed what was coming—the mongoose would play its usual cat-and-mouse game with the cobra. And he was right. As the outraged snake twisted, the little predator darted forward, only to spring swiftly aside as the cobra struck. Its mouth agape, hissing wickedly, the snake drew back and again the mongoose leaped in, seeking a grip on the reptile's neck. But once more the cobra's head snapped forward, striking with the speed of light, only to have its fangs slash at empty air as the mongoose skipped nimbly out of range.

"Go on, little mongoose," whispered Bharak, his hands clenched with excitement.

"Quiet," said Gundar, his attention focused rigidly on the drama being played out in front of them.

For long minutes the contest went on, with the mongoose streaking into the attack at every opportunity, and the cobra becoming more and more infuriated as each fresh strike failed to connect. The mongoose had to make only one mistake, as the moment those virulent poison fangs made contact it was finished. But as the snake grew more irritated so its striking grew wilder. And the mongoose made no mistake. With its gaze fixed on the cobra's beady black eyes it moved in close, waiting for the attack. The hooded head flashed down, but its elusive quarry was no longer there. Sidestepping with the agility of long practice, the mongoose whipped neatly around, and then caught the snake at

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the back of its neck as it tried to withdraw into its coils.

The cobra writhed convulsively, but there was no escape. The mongoose's fangs sank deeper into its neck, shaking and biting the life out of it, and a few seconds later it was lying dead with a broken back.

Gundar drew a deep sigh of relief. The mongoose always won in the end, he knew that, but it was still a source of wonder to him that any living creature could evade the strike of a cobra, so swift that it could not be followed by the human eye.

A rustling behind him and the beat of wings overhead drew his attention back to the buffaloes, and he realized with a shock that it was long past the time when they should have left the waterside meadows. The cattle egrets which had accompanied the herd all through the daylight hours were rising in a shower of white, to go winging away to their roosting places, while high in the jungle an owl screamed its greeting to the fast-sinking sun.

Leaving the mongoose to its meal, the two boys gathered their animals together, urging them back toward the forest. But the buffaloes were enjoying the lush grazing among the deep grass by the river's edge and they were in no hurry to move on. Raising his staff, Bharak brought it down with a resounding thump across the hindquarters of one of the rear-most cows. With a snort of surprise she raised her head, stared at Bharak for a moment, walked a few paces forward and then dropped her head again to graze.

Gundar laughed as his cousin glanced at him helplessly. "They'll take their own pace and no other—" He broke off as the distant belling of a sambar—the Indian elk—echoed down through the trees.

"Could it be the Striped One?" asked Bharak, suddenly serious. "It's a long way off."

"We've a long way to go," retorted Gundar. "And it's getting late."

"We must hurry," he added urgently, as the sambar's warning bark came again, closer this time.

He glanced up at the faraway peaks of the Himalayas. Their soaring heights, shrouded in cloud for much of the year, were clear on this particular evening, and already the great fields of snow were becoming suffused with a rosy glow as the sun dipped toward the veil of mist hanging over the darkening floor of the plains. Even up here in the hills it would be dark within the hour, and Gundar knew that they could never reach the village in that time.

A nightjar fluttered up from beneath the hoofs of the herd, to go weaving silently away, flying low over the grass. But still the buffaloes plodded forward at their own unvarying gait and nothing the boys could do would persuade them to move any faster.

Gundar looked up at the rich green of the jungle-clad hills. The sambar had been silent for some time, which could mean that the cause of its alarm had passed on. Either that, or the animal had died beneath the claws of a big cat. He did not think this was the answer, however, because when those killers of the jungle stalked their prey, the victim rarely had time for more than a single cry of terror. And the sambar's belling had carried a note of anxiety rather than of outright fear.

It might have been disturbed by a prowling leopard and not by the tiger at all. Gundar had no means of knowing, but he was taking no risks, and when, eventually, they reached the fire line he and Bharak took pains to keep the buffaloes as much as possible away from the tangle of scrub and bamboo brakes flanking the edges of the sal forest.

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Moving ahead of the herd, with the bull calf plodding at his heels like some great dog, Gundar's sharp eyes took in every detail of the jungle, seeking some sign of warning of the tiger's presence. His ears, too, were tuned to catch any alarm call of bird or beast, but all was silent except for the lowing of the buffaloes and the rumble of their hoofs.

When at last a sound did break the stillness it was no warning call, but merely the evening chorus of the jackals beginning their nightly foray. The yelping howls rose from half a dozen different points, drew together, and then stopped as a single animal came out of the trees, looked casually right and left, and then trotted quietly across the open fire line. Five more followed, each casting a glance toward the boys and the buffaloes.

"The Striped One isn't in this part of the forest," murmured Bharak, coming to the head of the herd as the last grizzled form disappeared into the dense shadows of a brake of bamboo. "The jackals would be more wary if he were."

Gundar nodded. "We still have a long way to go," he said. "And anything can happen between here and the village."

The shadows were lengthening as the glowing red orb of the sun skidded down through the pink-tinged mist toward the horizon. Somewhere in the jungle, a peafowl screamed harshly and rose to its roosting place with a clatter of wings. A stream of flying foxes—the great fruit-eating bats of India—erupted over the treetops, heading for their feeding grounds. The vague rustling of leaves and the squeaking of smaller animals filled the air, while a covey of hill partridges exploded from the grass tussocks, to go scurrying away in all directions.

It was very peaceful. And then, suddenly, Gundar began

to feel uneasy. They were approaching the nullah and he glanced over his shoulder at the buffaloes. The calf was still at his heels and the rest were ambling along at their own gait, with Bharak following behind. Everything seemed to be normal, but still the feeling persisted.

With a puzzled frown, Gundar peered into the forest on either side. He could see nothing wrong, and for a long time there had been no warning calls from any jungle creature—not since the belling of the sambar, in fact. He shook his head. Something was not as it should be, he felt sure, but what was it?

As they came level with the nullah he glanced along it in both directions. It was deserted, but as he paused, waiting for the herd to catch up, Gundar became suddenly aware of an unnatural silence in the area around him. This was the time of day when the jungle came to life, but not a sound issued from the shadowy depths of the forest. The rustling movements of smaller creatures had ceased completely. It was almost as though they were holding their breath, waiting for something to happen.

Even as he realized that it was the silence that had caused his uneasiness the buffaloes began to bellow. The bull calf came closer, nuzzling his shoulder as though seeking protection. Gundar looked around quickly. Either the uncanny stillness was affecting the animals, or they had scented something they did not like. Whatever it was, the jungle was no place to be in after dark and he moved on again, casting anxious glances around him. But in spite of his vigilance, he did not see the lithe form crouching low among the tightly packed stems of a clump of bamboo just beyond the nullah, to one side of the fire line.

Somewhere far off in the jungle a burst of lively chattering broke the stillness, as a pair of mynahs engaged in a

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garrulous conversation before settling for the night. Automatically, Gundar turned to face the sound. But in the same instant a nerve-shattering roar brought him spinning around—to glimpse a streak of amber and black as the tiger exploded into life.

5

The Tiger Strikes

"No—!"

A scream of terror burst from Gundar as he glimpsed the tiger hurtling toward him. But even as he leaped aside, a moan from the bull calf told him the great cat had reached its target. Struggling frantically, Khan collapsed under its weight, but the tiger had struck too far back to make a clean kill. Perhaps because of the amount of open ground it had to cover before making its spring, the cat had misjudged its final attack. And instead of landing high up on the buffalo's shoulders and neck it had come down across the hind-quarters. But it was shifting its hold, ripping and slashing, seeking a position from which it could deliver a fatal blow.

All this Gundar took in in one swift glance as he recovered his balance. And the sight which met his horrified gaze drove out all thought of his own danger. He was aware of one thing and one thing only—that his beloved buffalo was being savagely mauled by the tiger. Somehow he had to drive the cat away, back into the jungle where it belonged.

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Without pausing to consider the risk, he darted in close and began to beat the tiger on the head with his staff. It was a futile gesture. With a rumbling snarl of fury the great cat turned. Relinquishing its hold it struck at Gundar. The blow missed, but a second flashing sweep of that massive forepaw smashed the pole from his grasp, leaving him completely unarmed.

Freed from the weight of his assailant Khan stumbled to his feet, to stand splay-legged and bleeding, his terror-filled gaze fixed on the tiger. But the cat's attention was on Gundar. Staring into that pair of hate-filled eyes, the boy felt his strength ebbing from him. Despairingly he groped for his fallen staff. But before he could recover it, the tiger snarled again. Unable to tear his gaze from those blazing yellow eyes Gundar tried to back away. But it seemed almost as though the great cat were holding him rooted to the spot. He could not move and as he stood, paralysed with fear, he saw the tiger crouch, its lips drawn back in a snarl to expose murderous white fangs.

For what seemed an age, the two remained motionless. And then, as the great cat gathered itself for the fatal spring, Gundar became aware of another sound behind him. The bawling of the buffaloes, which had seemed far away, was drawing closer. He could hear a rumbling thunder of hoofs and he saw the tiger's glance switch abruptly beyond him. For a brief instant he was at a loss to know what was happening. But then, as a massive black body loomed beside him, the spell was broken and Gundar came suddenly to life, hurling himself aside.

Next moment he was engulfed in a surging wave of flying hoofs and horns. He had a confused glimpse of black and amber as the tiger whirled to face this new and unexpected menace. Then one of the buffaloes caught Gundar a

glancing blow as it charged past, sending him reeling backward.

For several seconds he lay where he had fallen, shivering with terror. His eyes were drawn irresistibly back toward the tiger. But the great cat was no longer interested in him. It was watching the buffaloes. And as their bellowing drowned its roars, Gundar's fears began to subside. With an effort, he steadied himself and stumbled to his feet.

"The buffaloes—they saved my life," he whispered, running his tongue over parched lips. "But the Striped One—oh!"

Gundar caught his breath as the tiger turned at bay, its face a twisted, snarling mask of fury, while the buffaloes, led by the herd bull, ranged in a trampling half-circle between the beast and the boy. With the jungle at its back the great cat could have made a getaway, but its rage at being deprived of its prey was such that all idea of escape was driven from its mind. Instead it crouched, tail flicking.

Even as the tiger launched itself, the herd bull's head went down, and a terrible roar of pain and fury drowned every other sound as the massive, razor-sharp horns ripped home, gashing the big cat's foreleg from shoulder to paw.

Gundar felt icy shivers running down his spine, and his face was damp with sweat as he stared fearfully at the two great beasts. For what seemed an age, the battle continued, with the tiger clinging and slashing across the buffalo's forequarters. But the cat had been partially crippled by that first savage blow, and again it had failed to secure the right hold. Lunging sideways, the bull smashed it against the trunk of a tree, and as it slid helplessly to the ground the other buffaloes charged in a surging black wave.

For a few moments the tiger held its ground, its snarls mingling with the infuriated bellowing of the buffaloes.

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But as that line of tossing horns and pounding hoofs thundered closer, its nerve broke and, spinning around, it vanished into the shadows of a tangled cane brake.

Seconds later, the noise of its limping departure died away—to be replaced by a rumble of hoofs as the buffaloes, their age-old enemy vanquished, stampeded away along the fire line. As he threw himself out of their path, Gundar had a vague glimpse of a surging tide of black bodies, wide, raking horns and wild, terror-filled eyes. And then the earth was shaking and a crushing wave of sound engulfed him as the herd tore past, intent on getting as far as possible from the scene of that savage encounter.

"Gundar! Gundar, are you hurt?"

Bharak's anxious voice sounded far away as Gundar struggled to his knees. He felt dazed and shaken. And as he fought to collect his numbed senses, the noise of the stampeding buffaloes receded into the distance and the dust began to settle. Aided by his cousin, he staggered to his feet.

"The herd won't stop until they reach the village," said Bharak, as his companion glanced along the fire line.

But Gundar's eyes were on something else. The young bull, son of the Old Warrior, was still standing by the edge of the forest, at the side of the nullah, and the sight of him drove all thought of his own cuts and bruises from the boy's mind.

"The little one . . .!" With an anguished cry, Gundar ran forward.

The young buffalo, trembling in every limb and with his head drooping pathetically, made no move as Gundar knelt to examine his injuries.

"That leg is bad," said Bharak, frowning as he looked at the frightful gash torn in the animal's near hind leg.

The little beast had suffered other injuries besides, but the gaping wound stretching from the haunch down, made when the tiger first struck, was by far the worst. Gundar shook his head despairingly. Khan was in a bad way—so bad that his life was in danger, and Gundar had no idea what he should do. He wished his father or Kala Singh were there to help him. But they were not and he had to make his own decision. "It will ruin him," he whispered brokenly, running his fingers gently down the buffalo's leg.

Sensing the boy's concern, Khan peered around. A low moan welled up from deep in his chest, and, seeing the trust and expectancy in his wide, frightened eyes, Gundar thrust aside his shattered dreams of the animal's future, and concentrated on what should be done immediately.

"The men will come out looking for us when they see the herd." Bharak sounded anxious. "But it will be dark in a few minutes and the Striped One . . ." He left the sentence unfinished, glancing fearfully toward the jungle.

"The Striped One may not return," replied Gundar, speaking with a confidence he did not feel. "But it would be better if we started back toward the village. There's nothing we can do for the little one out here."

With Gundar on one side of him and Bharak on the other, the young buffalo took a couple of tentative steps along the fire line. But then he gave a sudden groan and stopped again, head hanging.

"Come, little one," urged Gundar, placing a hand under the animal's muzzle and prompting him gently forward. "Once we reach the village you'll be safe."

"Gundar, we must hurry," said Bharak. "We don't know how far the Striped One went. And he may come back when it's dark, as he knows the little one is here."

Gundar nodded. The brief tropical twilight was already

closing in and he knew that his cousin was right. "There's nothing you can do, Bharak—nothing anyone can do out here. I think perhaps it would be best for you to go on ahead and fetch the men of our village. The Striped One won't attack once they are here."

"But what will you do?"

"I must remain with Khan," returned Gundar firmly. "I can't leave him alone, but it isn't necessary for us both to stay."

"There's no need for me to go," protested Bharak. "The men will come. They'll know we are somewhere on the fire line."

"But it would be foolish for both of us to stay," insisted Gundar. "Suppose the Striped One were to come back—we still couldn't stop him from taking the little one. No, Bharak, you must go on ahead."

Bharak shook his head stubbornly. "What would my father say if he knew I'd left you out here alone? If the Striped One comes we'll face him together."

"You're a good friend, Bharak," replied Gundar sincerely. He felt a wave of gratitude at Bharak's loyalty, as he did not relish the idea of a two-mile walk alone in the dark through heavily timbered country, knowing, as he did, that a wounded tiger was somewhere near and might return at any moment.

A low moan from the little bull drew his attention away from thoughts of the great cat. He stooped again to examine the injured leg, and frowned as he saw the wavering trail of crimson splashes marking the animal's progress.

"He's losing much blood," said Bharak.

"We daren't make him hurry," muttered Gundar. "That would only make things worse."

6

The Long Hours

With his head down and groaning in pain and terror, the young buffalo struggled on toward the village. Frequently, he had to stop and rest, his breath rasping in his throat, but each time the boys coaxed him forward again.

The light was fading rapidly. Darkness had already descended on the forest and a few moments later it was spreading out over the fire line. There was a moon, but it was on the wane and would not rise until much later. The stars, huge and glittering, shed some light but it served only to emphasize the shadows in the depths of the jungle on either side, where the dim recesses of each cane brake and patch of scrub seemed to Gundar to hold a lurking tiger.

Realizing how jumpy he was becoming, he made a valiant effort to get a grip on himself. But it was not easy, as the creatures of the jungle were more active by night than by day and the forest was alive with sounds of bird and beast.

Overhead, a second great cloud of flying foxes blotted out the stars and the heavy rustling of their wings was like a great gale of wind sweeping through the branches. The noise faded as the bats settled in a fresh clump of trees, and

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in the brief moment of silence, which preceded their chattering, screaming squabbles over the choicest fruit, Gundar heard a twig snap somewhere in the scrub thickets higher up the hillside. He jerked around, his heart thumping wildly as he stared toward the sound. Bharak paused, his fists clenched on the wood of his staff, while Khan's head came up as he, too, watched the thickets.

Next moment a pair of glowing eyes appeared in the undergrowth. For a long moment they stayed there, staring in surprise at the two boys and their charge. Then they vanished as their owner, snorting and grunting, furiously crashed away.

Gundar relaxed, conscious that he had been holding his breath, so tense had he become. "A wild pig," he sighed. "Nothing more."

Bharak laughed nervously, while Khan gave voice to a hoarse, long-drawn moan of relief before allowing his head to droop once more. Gundar glanced at him and shuddered, as the little buffalo was a pitiful sight, with his head hanging and the blood still pouring in a steady trickle from his torn hind leg.

"Keep moving, little one," Gundar said gently, "we're more than half-way to the village, and, once we reach it, all will be well."

There were no more alarms and they continued to make steady, if slow progress. But Khan was growing weaker all the time from loss of blood, and Gundar was becoming increasingly worried about him. He had been unsteady on his feet from the start, but soon he was lurching drunkenly from side to side, scarcely able to stagger along and with his damaged leg trailing uselessly. The pauses for rest became more frequent and twice the little buffalo almost fell over.

It took a great deal of effort on the part of both boys to keep him going, but somehow, with thoughts of the tiger never far from their minds, they succeeded.

"I wish the men would hurry," muttered Bharak.

"I thought I heard them a moment ago," answered Gundar. "Listen!"

They paused, peering into the darkness. No sound but the rustling of animals and the cries of night birds disturbed the stillness, and Gundar thought he must have been mistaken. But then he heard it again—a faint murmur of voices, and somewhere among the trees ahead an outburst of squawking told him that a roosting flock of parakeets had been disturbed.

The noise died down and a few minutes later a flickering lantern appeared over a rise in the fire line. A second and third followed and the sound of voices grew louder.

"You were right, Gundar," exclaimed Bharak.

"We'll be safe now." Gundar spoke with heartfelt relief. "The Striped One won't attack so many."

With renewed energy, the two boys urged on their faltering charge, while the men broke into a run at sight of them.

"Gundar! Bharak! What happened?" Raman Singh, in the forefront of the party, called out to his son. But then he saw Khan and a moment later he was on his knees beside the little bull.

"The Striped One tried to kill him," Gundar's voice shook with apprehension. "Father, will you be able to save him? You must help him, Father."

"I'll try, my son." Raman Singh leaned back on his heels and shook his head sadly. "He would have been such a fine beast. . . ."

"It's a bad injury," agreed Kala Singh, stooping to probe Khan's wounds with expert fingers. "But the little bull is

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strong. I think we may save his life, though he'll surely be lamed."

Raman Singh sighed again. "This is a bad day for us," he murmured. "I had expected so much from this son of the wild one—perhaps too much. It is not wise to take such things for granted."

Gundar said nothing as the men moved away. He had hoped that with the help of his father and uncle the young buffalo would make a complete recovery in spite of the obvious seriousness of his injury. But he knew now that it had been a futile hope, and the knowledge came as a crushing blow since he, too, had had great hopes and plans for Khan's future.

"He will live, though—he must live."

Gundar whispered the words fiercely to himself as he walked behind his father, his head hanging, staring at the ground. The shock had left him numb and despairing, as only a few short hours ago Khan had been so full of life and energy. Gundar could only hope and pray that the little bull would have the strength to survive, even though he might be lame for the rest of his life.

"There'll still be things he can do." Bharak cut in on his thoughts, trying to comfort him. "He'll be big and strong like the wild bull—that will make up for his lameness. And he may not be so very bad when the wound is healed," he added hopefully.

Gundar looked up miserably. A wan smile touched his lips. "I'd like to believe that could be so," he murmured.

"We're almost there," said Bharak, as the agitated lowing of buffaloes carried to them on the cool night air.

"Was the herd bull hurt? Or any of the others?" asked Gundar, suddenly forgetting his own distress and remem-

bering the fierce challenge of the herd, and the gallant defiance of its massive leader as he battled with the killer.

Gundar's uncle, Kala Singh, looked at him gravely. "The bull is hurt," he said. "But not badly. He'll be well again in a few days. As for the others, they weren't harmed." He paused for a moment and then went on: "You haven't told us what happened. Why were you not back in the village before dark?"

"And what became of the Striped One?" put in Raman Singh.

Gundar bit his lip. "The fault was mine, Uncle," he admitted. "I hadn't noticed how late it was." He went on to recount in detail the events of the last two hours.

His father nodded. His expression was thoughtful. "You should have seen to it that the buffaloes were safe in the village before nightfall," he said, but his tone was gentle as he understood how Gundar, who took his duties so seriously for a boy of his years, must be feeling.

"The Striped One was lying in wait for the herd," muttered Chandra Lal, the village headman, half to himself. "That's a bad sign, as now that he's injured he'll find it even more difficult to hunt and kill wild game. Almost certainly he'll try to attack the buffaloes again as soon as his wound is mended."

"That may not be so," argued Kala Singh, whose prowess as a hunter was known and respected throughout the valley. "After one such encounter with an enraged herd he might decide buffaloes are too dangerous. In which case he may move farther down toward the plains and prey instead on the smaller cattle of that area."

"Whatever he does, this is a bad day for the people of the Ranjipur Hills," said Chandra Lal grimly.

"Tomorrow, at first light, I'll take my gun and try to

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find him," announced Kala Singh. "But now we must attend to the little one."

"I'll fetch water," said Gundar, snatching up a wooden bucket and running off toward the well at the end of the village street.

When he returned, his father and Chandra Lal had guided the young buffalo into a corner of the cattle shed and were bedding him down on a thick layer of warm straw. Bharak appeared with an armful of white cloth torn into wide strips, and a few moments later Kala Singh came in, carrying a large bundle of dry moss.

"This will stop the bleeding," he explained, placing the bundle on the straw beside him.

Raman Singh knelt at his side and together the two men began to bathe Khan's wounds, cleaning them as best they could, as they possessed no antiseptics of any kind. Quietly, giving what help he could, Gundar watched as his uncle's deft fingers spread the moss over the little bull's leg and bound it tightly in place with strips of cloth.

For a long time he worked by the flickering light of a lantern held by Raman Singh, but at last the job was finished and he straightened up.

"That's the best we can do," he declared. "It's up to the little one himself now."

Raman Singh nodded silently, his expression grave. Turning on his heel he followed his brother from the building.

"Come, Gundar," he called back over his shoulder.

"Yes, Father."

Gundar paused for a last look at the young bull. "Oh, why should the Striped One have picked on Khan?" he whispered to himself. "There are so many buffaloes in the herd and yet . . . But it isn't good to think this way." With an effort he thrust aside what he knew to be a selfish

thought and followed his father out into the street.

But as he lay in the house, restlessly staring into the darkness, he could not forget the little buffalo, lying out there in the cattle shed. He rose softly to his feet and padded to the door. No one heard him as he slipped out into the starlit night, and a moment later he was kneeling by Khan's side.

The little bull still lay where they had left him, shivering violently, his breath rasping in his throat.

Gundar ran his fingers gently across the hot, dry muzzle and over the shaking neck and shoulders. "It becomes so cold after dark," he murmured, as even in the cattle shed, warmed by the heat of more than twenty bodies, the coolness of the night air was noticeable where it penetrated through cracks in the doors and walls.

For a few minutes longer Gundar remained by Khan's side. Then, suddenly, he leaped to his feet and darted out of the building and back to his house. Silently as a shadow he swung open the door, snatched up the single, coarse blanket which made up all of his bedding, and ran with it back to the cattle shed.

"This will keep out the cold," he whispered, spreading it over the quivering form.

On his feet again he gathered more straw and placed it around Khan's sides, arranging it so as to keep out the thin, night air.

At last he was satisfied. "I can do no more, little one," he said softly, and he thought the shivering seemed slightly less violent as he curled up in the straw beside Khan.

Many hours later, Gundar was wakened by a feeling of uneasiness. He started up, and his first thought was for Khan. But the little buffalo still lay quivering in the straw beside him.

Slowly, so as not to disturb the young bull, Gundar rose

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to his feet and moved toward the door of the cattle shed. It was dark inside the building, but as he approached the far end his sense of uneasiness increased. The buffaloes, too, were becoming restless, lowing and stamping.

And then, suddenly, he knew what it was that had disturbed him. Something was moving outside, prowling softly along by the wall. He reached the door and stopped with his hand on the latch. A thin beam of moonlight shone through a crack in the woodwork. He stooped to peer through it, and choked back a cry of fear as he looked straight into the white-ruffed face of the tiger.

7

Shadow of Death

For long moments Gundar stood there, paralysed with fear, while the big cat scratched and clawed at the planks, intent on forcing its way inside. The buffaloes were becoming really restive by this time. Their lowing had risen to a bellying crescendo as the door shook under the tiger's onslaught. Gundar hoped the men of the village would hear the noise and come to investigate. But the minutes passed and no one came.

He backed away from the door, and saw Khan struggling to rise. Running back to the bull calf, he knelt beside him, cradling the black head in his arms and taking comfort from the nearness of the little creature.

"The Striped One can't reach us," he whispered, trying to calm the buffalo and to reassure himself.

But he knew well enough that the door would never stop a really determined attack by the tiger. He thought of shouting to rouse the people of the village. But the sound of his voice might infuriate the cat and so he abandoned the idea.

He could clearly hear the rasping of its claws. The sound sent a chill down his spine and then, just as he

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thought the door must give, the scratching ceased.

It was replaced by a soft, scrabbling thud on the roof over his head and Gundar realized the tiger was up there, on the thatch. A fresh surge of fear engulfed him. There was nothing to stop the big cat; in a matter of minutes it would burst through into the cattle shed.

Desperately, he looked around for some kind of a weapon with which to defend himself, but it was dark and he could see nothing. With wide eyes he stared up at the roof, wondering why the brute should take so long. Then, suddenly, he became aware of a new sound, that of men's voices, and a shuddering wave of relief flooded through him.

The door was thrown open and Raman Singh came in, lantern in hand. Gundar stumbled across to him.

"Father, the Striped One. . . ."

"Yes, Gundar, we saw him." Raman Singh's tone was grim as he examined the claw marks on the door and wall of the shed.

"The Striped One must be killed," declared Chandra Lal in a worried tone. "Our buffaloes will never be safe as long as he lives."

"He followed the little one's blood trail," pointed out another of the men. "He may not return."

Kala Singh shook his head. "I had hoped his injury would make him forget the buffaloes. But I was wrong, and now that he has been into our village once . . ." He shrugged and the discussion continued, while Gundar made his way back to Khan's side.

That is where Raman Singh found him when the crowing of the jungle cocks heralded the approach of dawn more than an hour later.

The older man smiled down at him. "The little one seems better this morning."

Gundar nodded. The young bull's breathing did seem easier and the shivering had almost subsided.

"Your uncle has already left on the trail of the Striped One," went on Raman Singh. "May good fortune go with him."

"Shall Bharak and I take the herd down to the river meadows as usual, Father?" asked Gundar, half-hoping Chandra Lal would have decided to keep the buffaloes in the village until the tiger menace was past.

But in his heart he knew this could not be so as it would be impossible to feed so many animals by hand. He was not surprised, therefore, when his father answered in the affirmative.

"You must be back in the village well before nightfall," added Raman Singh. "Your uncle may not be able to find the Striped One and it would be foolish to take needless risks."

"Yes, Father," returned Gundar obediently.

He badly wanted to stay in the village, so as to be near Khan, but he had a job to do and with the loyalty of a true hillman he pushed his own feelings into the background.

Raman Singh nodded approvingly, as he knew how much his son wanted to remain near the young bull and he admired the courage he had shown in refusing to mention the matter.

"Don't forget what I've said," he warned as Bharak appeared. "The herd must be back here an hour before sunset."

"We'll not forget, Uncle," Bharak assured him as the two boys went along the shed, releasing the buffaloes.

The animals moved out into the sunlight, and Gundar paused for a last lingering look at the young bull, the son of the wild arna.

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"We'll take good care of him."

A girl's voice interrupted his thoughts, and he turned to see his sister, Naida, standing behind him, with a bucket of water in her hand.

"And you and Bharak must look after yourselves," added Gundar's mother anxiously. "I won't have a moment's peace until I know the Striped One is dead."

"My brother will take care of that," said her husband confidently. "And if by chance they should meet him he wouldn't harm the boys—only the buffaloes. You know the ways of the Striped Ones, and this is no man-eater but a beast grown too old to hunt wild game."

Gundar's mother was far from happy, however. "You must take care," she insisted, turning to the boys. "I'd feel happier if one of the men could go with you," she added, glancing nervously at Raman Singh.

"That isn't possible, with so much work to be done in the fields," he answered quietly. "We're already one man short with my brother out hunting the Striped One."

"We'll be all right, Mother," said Gundar reassuringly, and with a final glance at Khan, now in Naida's capable hands, he strode out into the street.

Bharak was outside and he turned with a smile as Gundar joined him. "The little one will recover," he declared. "I'm sure of it."

"But he'll be lame," muttered Gundar. Then he brightened. "So long as he lives and is well, that's all that matters."

Bharak nodded. "What is to be, will be. My father's bull isn't in the best of tempers," he added, glancing at the herd leader.

The big black beast had stopped at the end of the street and was pawing the ground and bellowing, doing his best

to intimidate one of the other two bulls. It was obvious that he was spoiling for a fight and Gundar smiled as he and Bharak came level with him, urging on the rest of the buffaloes so that he was left, looking rather foolish as he continued to challenge the empty street.

"His fight with the Striped One doesn't seem to have caused him much harm," remarked Gundar admiringly.

"He's strong," said Bharak, with a fierce pride in the great creature which was his father's most treasured possession. "Almost as strong as the wild one."

"That's true," agreed Gundar.

"He's angered by the flies on his wounds," went on Bharak. "He'll be all right once we reach the river and he can bathe and wallow in the mud."

"It's a good thing this is the cold season," said Gundar. "The flies aren't so bad at this time of year."

The rest of that day, spent in the lush green meadows by the side of the River Khada, seemed unending to Gundar. But at last the time came when they could begin the journey home. It was still very early, but since Raman Singh had warned them against being late, Gundar knew he would not be angry if they arrived before the agreed time. In spite of his anxiety about Khan, however, he did not neglect his duties, and both he and Bharak kept a sharp watch on both sides as they trudged back along the fire line.

Ever alert to the sounds of bird and beast, Gundar listened with an expert ear to every call of babbler, crow and peafowl; of chital and langur. But nothing indicated that the tiger might be near. He wondered if his uncle had managed to find and kill the great cat, but he did not know and, wise hunter though Kala Singh undoubtedly was, Gundar could not take anything for granted.

They reached the end of the fire line at last, without

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seeing or hearing anything significant, and Gundar glanced around expectantly. But Kala Singh was not there; he did not return until the last buffalo had been safely tethered in its place, and then it was with the disturbing news that he had not even seen the tiger. He had followed its trail for more than five miles, but then the big cat had entered the river and although he had searched for miles up and down both banks, the hunter had been unable to find the place where his quarry had finally left the water and taken once more to the jungle.

"The Striped One was travelling fast in spite of his injury," the shikari told his deeply interested audience of villagers. "And he was heading down the valley when last I saw his tracks. It is my belief that he'll travel far and not return to this area for some time."

"That's good news," remarked one of the men.

"But still we must take care," warned Chandra Lal. "The Striped Ones are cunning. No one can be sure of what they'll do."

"That's true," agreed Kala Singh. "And this one. . . ."

Gundar did not wait to hear any more. All day he had been longing to get back to Khan and now he slipped away from the crowd. Naida was still in the cattle shed with the little bull and she looked up as he approached.

"How is he?" asked Gundar.

At the sound of his young master's voice, Khan raised his head and a low bellow of greeting rumbled in his throat.

Naida smiled. "He's improving with every hour," she said. "And he recognizes you—that's a sure sign, as this morning he paid no attention to anyone."

She went on to give Gundar a detailed report of the day's happenings as he crouched by the little bull's head. Khan

had still not eaten anything, she told him, but that was only to be expected so soon after the accident. His breathing, however, was almost back to normal and he was beginning to take an interest in the other buffaloes.

Gundar, watching as the little beast stirred eagerly and glanced about him at the sound of the others' lowing, saw that this was true. All in all, he was satisfied with the way things were going, as it seemed that Khan was all set to make a rapid recovery from his terrible injuries. That would be proof of the strength and stamina he had inherited from the Old Warrior. But Gundar thought sadly of the magnificent creature he would have become.

"Gundar," Naida looked at him anxiously. "Did you see any sign of the Striped One? Mother and I have been so worried. We were afraid he might wait for the herd again, as he did when Khan was hurt."

"We saw nothing," Gundar assured her. "And the men think he may have moved on down the valley."

Some time later, Raman Singh came into the shed and Gundar helped him to bathe and dress Khan's wounds. That night, too, he spent lying in the straw beside the young bull and next day, to everyone's delight, the little buffalo succeeded in standing up. He achieved this feat late in the evening, with the aid of the overjoyed Gundar, while Bharak was securing the rest of the herd.

For a time he stood, trembling violently, with his injured leg hanging uselessly and his head drooping. He seemed exhausted by the effort it had taken, but he did not go down again. And an hour later he was standing firmly and beginning to show an interest in the sweet, fresh grass gathered by Naida earlier in the day.

"See, Naida, before long he'll be eating," said Gundar, doing his best to restrain his delight and act with the dignity

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his father would expect. "Soon he'll be well again and able to take his place in the herd."

"That's true, Gundar." Raman Singh paused, watching the young bull sadly. "He would have grown into such a splendid beast," he said wistfully, and then he shrugged. "But it's no good to think of what might have been. We can only hope and pray that the Striped One won't trouble us again."

And so the days passed. Days in which Khan rapidly grew stronger. His wounds healed, leaving him little the worse for his ordeal, except for the lameness which would always be with him. And, during this time, the Striped One gave them no trouble, although stories were told of a cattle-killing tiger which frequented the lower reaches of the Khada River Valley, causing much suffering among the villages there.

But then, early on a summer evening, events took a sinister turn. It was harvest time and Gundar and Bharak had returned with the buffaloes and gone into the fields above the village, where the others were busy cutting wheat. Working on one of the upper terraces, they had moved a little apart from the rest when Bharak stopped with an exclamation of surprise, pointing away down the valley.

"Gundar, look! Down there!"

Gundar followed his cousin's gaze. "A buffalo! It's Chandra Lal's bull—I'm sure of it."

"But what is it doing out there on the road—alone?" asked Bharak.

Gundar's expression was thoughtful as he studied the stumbling gait of the young bull moving along the rutted dirt road, far down in the valley.

"Something's wrong," he declared at last. "It's been badly frightened."

Bharak caught his breath. "Jungarh set out for Khandrapur this afternoon—with Chandra Lal's bull pulling his cart. Suppose the buffalo has broken loose. . . ."

"In that case Jungarh may be hurt and in need of help." As he spoke, Gundar threw aside his sickle and raced away down the steep slope.

"Gundar, come back!" Bharak's voice took on a note of alarm. "You can't go into the jungle alone. The Striped One. . . ."

But his cousin had already vanished beyond the thick green hedges enclosing the tiny wheatfields.

Memories of the tiger filled Gundar's thoughts also as he fought his way through brakes of fern and bamboo, taking the quickest path down to the road which ran along the floor of the valley. But it was not for himself that he feared. It was for Jungarh, who was old and who might have been injured when the buffalo broke loose from his cart.

Bursting out into a clearing, Gundar paused suddenly, choking back a cry of horror. Away over the treetops ahead of him, close to the road, vultures were circling.

8

Killer of Men

In desperate haste, Gundar pushed on, knowing he must try to reach Jungarh and yet dreading what he would find when he got there. He came out on to the wheel-rutted highway and turned along it. The vultures were there, off to one side over the jungle, and they were still circling. That could mean that Jungarh was alive. Or it could mean . . . Gundar thrust aside the other possibility. "The Striped One is no killer of men," he told himself.

But although he tried hard he could not convince himself, and his pace grew slower and slower as he approached a bend in the road. His hand closed over the hilt of his kirpan, while his eyes probed the bushes on either side. Nothing moved there and he went on, half-drawing the kirpan from its sheath as he reached the corner and peered between the trees.

"The cart! Jungarh's cart!" he gasped as he saw the vehicle, which was lying on its side among a tangle of plum bushes less than twenty feet away.

Throwing caution aside Gundar ran forward. There was no sign of Jungarh, but as he neared the cart he stopped

again, gazing in horror at the ominous splashes of deep crimson on the ground close to one of the big wheels. Beside the splashes were the pug marks of a tiger, deeply imprinted in the dust. Seized by an unreasoning panic, Gundar turned and fled, back along the road toward the village.

That was how the Striped One took his first human victim. And with Jungarh's death, the tiger had overcome its instinctive fear of Man. It still preferred cattle or buffaloes when it could get them, but it was growing bolder with every passing week. And its cunning did not desert it, since although Kala Singh spent days in the forest, only once did he get a glimpse of the big cat.

It was in the half-light of dusk, a bad time for accurate shooting. The shikari's rifle was old and the tiger was moving so swiftly that he scarcely had time to aim. As a result, the bullet merely clipped the animal's flank, stinging it into a hasty retreat, instead of penetrating the heart.

From that time on, the man-eater became even more cunning. It watched its human victims to make sure they were unarmed before launching an attack, and on the rare occasions when it revisited the scene of a kill, it circled the place first to make sure no traps had been laid.

The villagers of the Khada River Valley lived in constant terror of this menace from the jungle. But the work had to go on. If the fields were left untended the people would face an even worse death from starvation. So they continued to work, with one eye always on the nearby jungle, knowing death might be lurking in the shadows only yards away. The buffaloes still went down to the water meadows by the River Khada to graze, but now Gundar and Bharak carried spears with which to defend themselves, and they were accompanied by at least two men from their village. At night the people remained indoors; nothing would induce

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them to venture outside, even as far as the cattle shed.

But their precautions were futile against the power of the striped killer, and slowly but relentlessly the number of kills mounted. Men working in the fields were the chief victims, as they could not remain in groups, but women and children were also taken.

"It would be easier if we could spare animals to put out as bait," Kala Singh had said one day. "But our herd is so small it would be a hard blow if we lost even one. And I couldn't afford to pay for any buffalo which might be killed."

The weeks lengthened into months. Autumn and winter passed, summer came again, and still the toll mounted. By midwinter things were so bad that Chandra Lal, the village headman, sent out an urgent call for help. His appeal followed others from the headmen of nearby villages, as the Ranjipur man-eater had by this time claimed victims from every part of the Khada River Valley.

To everyone's relief, the appeal was quickly answered and Captain John Peters, Dave's father, arrived in the valley shortly afterward. Gundar and Bharak received this news with a feeling of elation, since, along with the others, they were confident that it could mean only one thing—the man-eater's reign of terror would soon be over. Captain Peters was highly regarded as a hunter of big game, both in India and Africa. He already had several man-eaters to his credit, and they felt sure it would not be long before the Ranjipur tiger was added to his list.

Gundar was humming cheerfully to himself as he followed the buffaloes along the sun-drenched fire line next morning. As usual Khan was by his side, and Gundar regarded him with affection as he plodded along through a haze of dust.

The young bull had by this time grown into a really splendid beast, almost five and a half feet high at the shoulder, rangy and lean, and with a magnificent pair of flat crescent-shaped horns, sweeping back over his shoulders and spanning five feet and more from tip to tip—horns that would soon rival those of the Old Warrior himself. He was jet black and carried his head proudly, as befitted such an animal, son of the great wild arna. But his appearance was marred by the terrible scars and a slight deformity of the hind leg where the tiger had struck. His movements, too, were handicapped. He could not turn quickly, nor could he move with any speed, but to Gundar these were only minor blemishes. In his eyes, Khan was still the greatest buffalo the village had ever seen, as he undoubtedly would have been except for his lameness.

"Soon now the Striped One will be made to pay for his wrongdoing," Gundar breathed, caressing the buffalo's muzzle. "And then we shall live in peace as we did before, with no shadow of death hanging over us."

Gundar's dreams were soon to be shattered, however. One afternoon a few days later Captain Peters called together the men of the village. They met in Chandra Lal's house and the Englishman wasted no time in stating his point.

"If I'm to catch this tiger I must have animals to use as bait—live animals," he announced.

Chandra Lal bowed his head in agreement, as they all knew this must be so. A dead beast was of no use, because if the man-eater did not come on the first night it would be consumed by jackals, vultures and other scavengers. This meant that another would have to be provided on the next night. And since it might be days, or even weeks, before the tiger took their bait this method was obviously impracticable.

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"I need two animals at least, preferably more," went on Captain Peters. "Compensation will be paid for these, of course. And any that the tiger doesn't take will be returned to their owners." He turned to the headman. "Have you any suggestions?"

Chandra Lal looked uncomfortable. "We are poor people," he muttered. "We have no animals but the buffaloes—and our lives depend on them."

Captain Peters nodded. "I understand," he said. "But at the same time there's no other way of catching the tiger. And I must have big animals," he added, "so that there'll be enough left for a second meal."

A murmur of agreement came from the assembled men. They knew well enough what Captain Peters wanted, and why. He would tether the animals to be used as bait out in the forest at night. Each day they would be collected and would go out to graze with the herd, but if any one of them had been killed he would sit over it on the following night in a machan, or hide, built in the branches of some nearby tree. It was the only way in which the man-eater could be caught, as it seldom returned to a kill it had made among cattle or buffaloes which were accompanied by their herdsman. If, however, it came on a single animal alone in the forest at night, it might think the beast had strayed away from some village herd—in which case there was every chance that it would return for a second feast. If that was its intention it would, like all tigers, cover the carcass with twigs and leaves to make sure no scavengers found it.

All this the villagers knew and they realized, too, that the more animals Captain Peters could use as bait the better were his chances of success. But their buffaloes were precious, and they possessed no other animals. Captain Peters looked thoughtful. "How many buffaloes have you?"

"Barely a score, as already the Striped One has taken two of our herd," answered Chandra Lal, since twice in recent months the tiger had attacked their buffaloes as they grazed beside the Khada and on neither occasion had Gundar and the others been able to prevent it from making a kill. "And we couldn't afford to part with even one of the cows that are left," went on the headman. "They're too valuable for the milk they give and the calves they bear. As for the bulls . . ." He glanced hesitantly at Raman Singh.

Gundar's father bowed his head, but did not speak.

Instead, another of the men, Darakand, broke in: "My bull is old. I've no wish to use him in this way, but he has only a little longer to live and if he dies beneath the Striped One's claws it will have been in a good cause."

"That's the best way to look at it," said the Englishman. "I don't like using live beasts for bait, but as I've said before it's our only chance. And the brute's got to be stopped somehow. It's killed far too many people already." He looked inquiringly at Chandra Lal. "By the way, when I was watching the buffaloes the other evening I saw a lame bull—a young one. . . ."

"I couldn't part with Khan—not as bait for the Striped One," burst out Raman Singh, and then paused, aware that the others were watching him.

"But if he's lame . . .?" Captain Peters looked curiously at the bearded Sikh.

Hesitantly, half-fearing he would be ridiculed, Raman Singh told the Englishman of the events which had led up to Khan's birth and his subsequent injury.

But Captain Peters was a kindly and considerate man. He had a son of his own and he could understand Raman Singh's regard for Gundar's feelings.

Chandra Lal, however, was more concerned with the

safety of the villagers, as indeed he had to be; as headman their welfare was in his hands.

"Maybe, if we explained our need, Gundar would understand," he suggested.

"The young bull is badly lamed," said another of the men. "He will never be able to work, and we can't afford to keep animals as pets—not at a time like this."

"Besides which," added Balu Lal, the headman's son, "Khan has the blood of the wild arna in him. When he is a little older he will surely fight with the other bulls, and although he is lame, his size and strength might enable him to cripple one of them. Then where would we be?"

Chandra Lal nodded. "My son is right," he said. "We have only the two working bulls—mine and that of Kala Singh. If we were to lose one of them. . . ."

He left the sentence unfinished, since to get all of the village's planting done in time for a safe harvest they really needed three bulls. Two were scarcely enough, and with one it would be an impossible task.

"And what would people think if Peters Sahib were to fail because we preferred to keep an animal as a pet rather than sell it as bait to trap the Striped One," put in a new voice. "Everyone in the valley would scorn us."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"The people in the other villages will make great sacrifices to provide Peters Sahib with animals for bait," went on Chandra Lal gravely. "And we must do our share, as this is a serious matter and involves the entire valley—not just our village."

Raman Singh lowered his gaze. He knew they were right. But he was thinking of Gundar, and he hesitated while the others watched him expectantly.

9

Tiger Bait

"Maybe, if Peters Sahib could use one of my cows . . ." he said at last, his voice low and hesitant.

"That would be foolish," burst out Balu Lal angrily, while several of the others were looking at Raman Singh with equal hostility.

"Gundar will soon be a man," said Chandra Lal. "He must learn to accept responsibility."

"But with the money for my cow and Darakand's bull we could perhaps buy another animal," argued Raman Singh. He was determined to save Khan for Gundar if it was possible, although he realized it was all but hopeless, as to buy another full-grown buffalo bull in the Khada River Valley would be impossible.

A cow would be equally unobtainable since the other villagers, like themselves, would need every beast they possessed, and the buffaloes were more valuable to them than any amount of money could be. They lived by their farms and hard cash could not be harnessed, nor could it produce milk or new young calves.

"Such talk is utter foolishness," exploded Chandra Lal,

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voicing the thoughts of all in the room. "I had thought better of such a man as you."

"The lives of our people are surely more important than that of one lame bull," added Balu Lal impatiently.

Raman Singh looked away. He had his own family to think of. The Striped One's next victim might be his wife, or Naida, or Gundar himself. He turned wearily toward Captain Peters, who had remained quietly in the background while the argument raged.

"They're right," he said. "It would be foolish to keep Khan while the Striped One kills the people of our valley."

And so, all unknown to Gundar, the decision was made. Returning to the village that evening his heart leaped at the sight of the villagers outside Chandra Lal's house.

"It's Peters Sahib," he whispered to Bharak. "Maybe he's found a way of killing the Striped One."

His cousin nodded. "The rifle he carries—it's a beautiful weapon," he murmured, gazing in awe at the heavy, gleaming .375 Mauser in Captain Peters's hands and comparing it with the ancient weapon owned by his father.

But Gundar was not interested in the rifle. He was looking at his father, and wondering at the expression of uncertainty on the older man's face.

Suddenly Raman Singh broke away from the group and strode across. "Gundar . . ." He spoke hesitantly, placing his hands on his son's shoulders.

"Yes, Father?" Gundar looked up at him in puzzlement, with a sudden undefined fear clutching at his heart.

"Gundar," repeated Raman Singh, "I have sold Khan to Peters Sahib."

He paused, waiting for some reply, but Gundar was too stunned to speak. He could only stare in horror. Khan—

his Khan—the magnificent young bull, son of the wild one, to be sacrificed as tiger bait.

"He's lame. He can do no work," Raman Singh went on with a rush. "And later there may be another young bull, Gundar. One which is fit and able to work. A bull which will bring credit to our family. . . ."

Captain Peters went to Gundar's side. "If, through Khan's death, I'm able to shoot the tiger, then he'll have given greater service to the people of this valley than any other buffalo in your herd," he said quietly. "Think of it in that way, Gundar, and the loss won't seem so great."

"Besides," put in Gundar's mother, gently, "the Striped One may not take Khan."

"That is so," agreed Raman Singh. "Our friends have sold animals to Peters Sahib, also. They'll be put out in different parts of the valley, and who knows where the Striped One will strike. . . ."

Gundar nodded. He could not trust himself to speak. And suddenly he broke away, running blindly toward the cattle shed.

"Gundar . . ." Bharak started after him.

"Let him go," ordered Raman Singh sharply.

"He'll get over it in time," declared Captain Peters confidently.

"I hope you're right, Sahib." Raman Singh bowed his head sadly. "I hope you're right."

But he knew Gundar as only a father can, and he wondered. . . .

Alone and unnoticed, Gundar crouched in the warm straw in a darkened corner of the cattle shed. And he felt his whole world shatter about him as he watched Khan, and the old bull belonging to Darakand, being led away. The muted lowing of the buffaloes covered the sound of his

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movements as he darted to the door, and what he saw sent a fresh wave of horror through him. Kala Singh and the lame bull were turning into the fire line—a move which could mean only one thing: that Khan was to be tied out near the nullah, one of the tiger's chosen haunts.

Of course, Gundar knew the reason why his buffalo was being placed in the most dangerous position of all. Khan was lame and therefore useless. He was also young, while Darakand's bull was old and less attractive as bait for the tiger. The latter, also, would be able to work for a few more months, maybe even a year or two, and if one of the two had to be killed, the villagers would rather it were the useless Khan.

So Gundar reasoned, and bitterness welled up within him. "They can't do it," he muttered savagely. "I won't let them give him to the Striped One."

"Gundar. . . ."

He broke off, spinning around with a guilty start at the sound of his father's voice.

"It's time you were indoors," said Raman Singh, gently. "This is no place to be at a time like this."

"Yes, Father."

With bowed head, Gundar walked obediently back to the grey-walled house which was his home. But he could not rest. Out there in the cattle shed a wild idea had come to him, and he knew he had to carry it out. So he waited, tossing and turning under the cover of his blanket.

An hour passed and the moon rose. He could see its light shining through a crack in the woodwork of the door. And still he waited, although each second seemed like an hour.

At last he could stand it no longer. Rising to his feet, he padded silently into the living-room, taking his blanket with him. Three small sacks of coarse flour stood in one

corner, the produce of their own wheatfields, and he took one, placing it carefully in the middle of his folded blanket. Next he found a small metal cooking pot which his mother no longer used, and filled it with a handful of dried beans. Putting it alongside the flour he drew the corners of the blanket together to form a bundle. His final task was to search out flint, steel and tinder box, and these he tucked into the waistband of his dhoti. There were matches, but they were scarce and he preferred the old-fashioned and slower method, which anyhow seemed more reliable to his way of thinking.

These few simple preparations completed, he slung the bundle over his shoulder, picked up his spear and kirpan and stepped across to the door.

But even as he opened it, a slight creaking of the bamboo matting behind brought him whirling around.

"Naida!" he gasped.

"Where are you going, Gundar?" She spoke in a whisper, her voice strangely muffled.

Looking closely, Gundar could see she had been crying.

"To Khan," he answered truthfully, knowing it was useless to pretend otherwise.

"But, Gundar, you can't," she clutched at his arm, her dark eyes appealing. "You can't go out into the jungle alone, at night. The Striped One is somewhere out there. He'll kill you."

"He'll kill Khan also, if I don't take him away from this place," muttered Gundar, shaking himself free. "Naida." He paused. "You won't tell anyone? They'll find out soon enough in the morning."

"No, Gundar, it's too dangerous. Don't you think it is bad enough for us to lose Khan?" Her voice broke. "Must we lose you also?"

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"I have my spear," Gundar reminded her.

"But, Gundar, even our uncle, Bharak's father, wouldn't tackle such a creature as the Striped One with nothing but a spear. And you are only a boy. . . ."

Gundar drew himself up proudly. "I may not yet be a man, but I won't let them give Khan as bait to the Striped One. I may not even see him," he added reassuringly, "and two days' journey will take me out of his territory."

His sister dropped her gaze. "It's so dangerous," she repeated, half to herself. And then she looked at him again. "You will take care, Gundar?" she breathed, suddenly realizing that nothing she could say would make him change his mind.

"I will, Naida," he replied. "But you must promise you won't wake the others."

Naida hesitated, but only for a moment. "I promise, Gundar. . . ."

Naida watched as he vanished into the shadows. For a long time she stood there, staring into the darkness, her mind in a turmoil. Could he survive out there, alone? Or should she break her promise and rouse their parents? In Naida's eyes every shadow held a lurking tiger and she was sorely tempted, as she was fond of her brother.

Out in the Forest

Out in the open, Gundar was already beginning to feel very small and insignificant. He had never been out alone at night before, and although normally he would not have felt the lack of a companion he wished now that he could have had someone to talk to. The knowledge that a man-eater lurked somewhere among the trees unnerved him. He found himself jumping at every slight movement, at every rustling leaf.

Desperately he wanted to run back to the safety of his home in the village. But then he thought of Khan, tethered and helpless, with no means of escaping and little chance of defending himself, and he pushed on with dogged determination. He had made his decision and he must stick to it.

A sudden crash among the thickets to one side almost made him break his resolve. In panic, he half-turned and then pulled up, trembling with relief, as he heard the yelping, doglike bark of a little barking deer.

Steeling himself he walked on again. "What would Naida say if I were to turn back now," he muttered. "She would think me a coward."

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All the same he found himself half hoping she would break her promise and rouse their father. That way he would be found by the search party which was sure to follow him—and he would be able to return to the village without losing face. He would be in disgrace, but. . . .

"But this is no way to think," Gundar scolded himself fiercely. "I'm a man, not a child who must run from every danger. The Striped One may not be within miles of this place. He's a creature of flesh and blood and he can't be everywhere at once."

He knew, though, that there was a good chance that the tiger was in that area, as its conduct seemed to follow a regular pattern. It would take a victim from a village on the southern side of the River Khada and then move on up the valley, to strike a few days later at the next settlement on the same side. From there it passed on across the river and worked its way down the far side of the valley until it was back at its starting place—the whole procedure taking anything from three to six weeks. And its last known kill had been three days ago, when it had taken a woman from a village some fifteen miles lower down the valley.

"Gundar! Gundar!"

The soft call brought him spinning around, staring into the darkness. At first he could see nothing and he thought Naida must, after all, have broken her promise. But then he made out a slim figure running toward him.

"Bharak!" he exclaimed. "Bharak, you shouldn't be out here. What would your father say?"

"You're going to Khan," said Bharak flatly, ignoring the question. "Is that wise, Gundar?"

"I must go," answered Gundar. "I can't leave him out there alone, at the mercy of the Striped One."

He looked at Bharak and noticed for the first time that

his cousin carried a spear and a bundle similar to his own.

Bharak saw the glance. "I knew you would go," he said, simply. "And I couldn't let you go alone—not while the Striped One lives. I kept watch from my father's house," he went on. "But I couldn't follow you until Naida went back inside. Gundar, she knows you've gone."

"I know," replied Gundar. "But she promised to tell no one until morning." He paused. "But you can't come with me, Bharak. You must go back—quickly, before anyone finds out you've gone."

Bharak shook his head stubbornly. "No, Gundar. We've always done everything together. And this will be no different. If you must go, then I will go too."

"But, Bharak. . . ."

"This is no place to argue," said Bharak, his gaze roving nervously over the forest on either side. "Suppose the Striped One is nearby. He might hear our voices. Gundar, we've no time to waste."

Gundar nodded silently. He could find no words to express his gratitude. Afraid though Bharak undoubtedly was, and with reason, he knew nothing he could say would persuade his cousin to change his mind.

"We must keep in the open," he said instead, remembering the jungle lore his uncle had taught him.

Moving quietly along in the middle of the broad fire line, where the moon and stars gave enough light for them to see quite clearly, both boys felt very exposed. Every instinct told them to take shelter among the trees, where they could hide. But they resisted the temptation, as they knew the tiger would have every advantage in the dark depths of the forest. That was its home and no one could outwit the Lord of the Jungle in his own territory at night. But out in the

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open, they would at least have a chance to see the man-eater and defend themselves.

"My father once told me the Striped Ones will never attack down-wind," said Bharak suddenly. "And they always take their victims from behind if they can."

Gundar nodded. That knowledge gave him some comfort, as the slight breeze was blowing on their backs. But the fire line seemed to be without end, and more than once they were startled by the crash of a deer or wild pig moving in the thickets, or by the silent flight of owl and night-jar in the open ahead of them.

"If only there weren't so many creatures abroad at night," muttered Bharak after one particularly unnerving incident.

"We should be thankful there are," returned Gundar, practically. "If there were not how would we know of the Striped One's presence?"

Bharak did not reply, since he knew as well as his cousin that the wild creatures of the jungle were their best insurance against a surprise attack by the tiger.

Just the same it was with feelings of relief that they came at last to the nullah where Khan was tied. Gundar felt his pulse quicken in anxiety. Would the lame bull still be alive? Or were they already too late? He fought down an impulse to run the last few hundred yards and the two boys covered the short distance with the utmost caution.

"It's so dark," murmured Bharak apprehensively.

The banks of the nullah were in deep shadow and a cold feeling of dread swept over Gundar, as he could see no sign of Khan. There was no sound, either. Their hearts thumping wildly, the cousins moved on along the fire line, both half-crouching in an involuntary attempt to make themselves less noticeable.

"There he is!"

A wave of joy overwhelmed Gundar as he saw the young buffalo. Khan was on his feet, standing propped at the very limit of his tether, his eyes wide and nostrils flaring as he gazed into the blackness of the jungle beyond.

"Khan. . . ."

The lame bull's ears flicked, but he gave no other sign that he had heard. He remained in the same tense attitude, propped on his three good legs, staring fixedly into the jungle.

"The Striped One!" Bharak's eyes darted from side to side as they reached Khan.

"He must be close by." Gundar's attention was on the point which the young buffalo watched.

"Be quick, Gundar," Bharak's voice carried a hint of panic.

Using the steel blade of his spear, Gundar slashed through the tough hemp rope by which Khan was tied, and led the trembling animal out into the open fire line, his eyes still fixed on that point at which Khan had been staring.

"Come! We must hurry."

Gundar gripped one of the young bull's horns, urging him toward the river and away from the village. Khan was only too keen to obey, moving with all the speed he could muster, and his very eagerness confirmed Gundar's suspicions that the tiger must be nearby.

Bharak came up beside him, his gaze still on the forest and his spear half-raised. But now, strangely, Gundar felt no fear. Only a vast sense of relief that he had accomplished what he had set out to do. Knowledge of the man-eater's presence served simply as a spur, urging him on to get as far away as possible before his own absence and that of his cousin was noticed, and search parties set out from the village to find them.

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Perhaps the closeness of the massive young bull gave him confidence, or maybe it was because he had a rough idea of the tiger's position—that he was no longer looking for it in every shadow and behind every bush. Khan, too, seemed to share his feelings as the tenseness had left him. With a low, rumbling bellow of contentment he settled into his ponderous, plodding gait at his young master's side.

And somewhere in the jungle behind them, Gundar heard again the sharp, ringing alarm of a barking deer.

"Perhaps the Striped One has found another victim," he whispered to Bharak.

"Maybe," replied his cousin. "But I'll be happier when we're on the other side of the river."

"We'll be safe then, for a few hours at least," said Gundar.

Their one concern was to get away from the village—away from the people who would give Khan as bait to the Striped One. And to this end they pushed on through the night at the best speed the young bull could manage. Never for a moment did they relax their vigilance, however, as they both knew the alarm call of the barking deer did not prove that it had seen the tiger. It might have been a leopard that had startled the little creature, or nothing at all, as barking deer are notoriously timid beasts and liable to shout an alarm almost at the sight of their own shadows.

The only sign they saw of the tiger, however, was a set of very old pug marks in the sand of the river bed. "They're surely the marks of the Striped One," remarked Gundar. He pointed to the print of the left forefoot. "See how it turns inward?"

"That is proof of his lameness," said Bharak. "Caused by the wound he received from my father's bull."

Further proof was in the splayed-out toes which revealed

the advancing age of the animal that had made the prints. But the pugs were blurred by wind and weather, and they were crossed and recrossed by the trails of insects and other, larger creatures.

Passing over the sand bar, the pair plunged through the reeds and into the icy waters of the river. Khan followed and they secured their bundles of belongings over the young bull's horns to keep them dry.

The buffalo's deformed hind leg scarcely handicapped him in the water. He was a powerful swimmer, and with his young master and Bharak hanging on alongside, he headed upriver into the current. But so intent were the boys on getting out of the man-eater's territory and away from the village that they gave no thought to any other danger which might exist. As a result it was not until Gundar saw a swirling eddy in the water ahead of them and Khan turned suddenly toward the reed beds, that he began to feel uneasy.

Even then he did not pay much attention until the young bull redoubled his efforts, swimming with a power which could only mean he was badly frightened. Gundar glanced again at the eddy. It was getting much nearer and closing in swiftly. He could see what looked like the rough crest of a floating tree trunk at the head of the swirl, and with a sudden shock he realized it was a crocodile. And this was no harmless gharial, as he could clearly see the blunt snout of a mugger—the true flesh-eating crocodile of India.

"Bharak, look out! The mugger!" Gundar's voice rose on a note of panic.

II

Jungle Journey

Overcome by fear, Gundar released his hold on Khan and struck out himself, but the buffalo had noticed their danger in time. All three reached the safety of a dense bed of reeds and plunged into it, although Bharak was barely inches from the flailing tail of the monster as it lashed out, trying to sweep him into the river.

"We must take better care in future," he gasped, turning to watch the huge mugger as it slid back into the seething brown water. "There are many things to fear out here besides the Striped One. We should do well to remember them."

Gundar nodded. Now that the immediate danger was past he had begun to reflect on the enormity of what he had done. A feeling of guilt overwhelmed him as he realized that he was endangering not only his own life, but that of his cousin.

"Bharak," he began soberly, "it is not right that you should risk your life this way. It's bad enough that I should cause so much distress, but I could never rest if I let the Striped One take Khan." He paused, fondling the young

bull's muzzle as the buffalo stood over him, lowing contentedly. "But your place is with your family. . . ."

"Khan may not belong to my father," retorted Bharak. "But you're my cousin and my place is with you." He looked at Gundar. "If you go back, I'll go, too. But if you stay with Khan, I must remain also."

"But Bharak . . ." Gundar began again, and again stopped, realizing it was useless to argue.

"When this thing is settled, perhaps we can both return to the village. . . ." he said instead, and then smiled suddenly. "We have this island to ourselves," he went on, gazing around over the low, scrub- and reed-covered bar which lifted like a whale's back from the slow-flowing waters of the river. "We can rest here for a time."

Reaching up, he unfastened his own and Bharak's bundles from Khan's horns and both boys wrapped themselves in their blankets, since the night wind was cool.

"We dare not stay long," said Gundar. "Our fathers will be out looking for us at first light."

"We must leave this valley," agreed Bharak. "Then we'll be safe from the Striped One also."

And so it was that an hour later they were on the move again. But this time they kept to the shallows where they could wade for most of the time, and where there was less danger of being attacked by one of the big mugger crocodiles which had their home in the swampy backwaters of the river.

All through the early hours, they remained in the waters of the Khada, avoiding its reed beds and sand bars, as Kala Singh was an expert tracker and the boys could think of no other sure way of throwing him off their trail. The stars faded, while a glowing flush of primrose spreading over the far distant peaks announced the rising of the sun, and

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a whirring of wings heralded the first flights of wild duck returning to their daytime resting places.

The writhing tendrils of mist curling up from the river took on a warmer tint as the sun climbed higher, and Gundar turned to look back along the valley.

"We'll have to leave the river now," he said. "But we'll be able to move faster through the forest."

"I'm hungry," complained Bharak. "Maybe we should eat first."

"There are plenty of plantains," said Gundar, heading toward a stand of the wild bananas whose huge leathery leaves were prominent among the lush vegetation of the swampy valley floor. "We'll gather some. But we can't stop to cook them. We must get farther away."

Gundar, too, was hungry, very hungry, but he dared not stop to eat yet. There would be time for that later in the day when they found a place to rest. For the moment he could think only of getting as far into the mountains as possible.

"I have some mangoes," said Bharak. "Only three, because it's too early in the year and the rest weren't ripe, but they're big ones." He produced one of the yellow fruits from his bundle and used his kirpan to slice it in halves. "We can eat it while we walk."

Gratefully Gundar accepted the juicy fruit and pushed on toward the bananas. Moisture glistened on the leaves and splattered in cold showers on the boys' bare shoulders as they struggled through the tangled shrubbery, while the dew-spangled threads of spiders' webs traced a delicate pattern over every bush. The jungle here was thick, almost too thick for them to force a path, and they dropped back to let Khan take over the lead.

A porcupine rattled its quills at them before scuttling on

its way, back to its daytime retreat under the dark roots of some forest giant. Red jungle fowl clucked beneath the bushes and a kaleege pheasant, handsome in plumage of blue-glossed black and brown, rocketed away, chattering its alarm.

All that morning the cousins and Khan pushed on, and by midday they were high in the hills and the river had dwindled to a winding, silvery ribbon far below. A wide, grassy plateau stretched ahead, dotted with big, buttressed silk-cotton trees, each one with its own mixed flock of birds—sober brown babblers and mynahs, glittering crimson and green sunbirds, green parakeets and purple-black jungle crows—which squabbled incessantly over the fleshy crimson flowers adorning every bare branch.

They decided to pause here for a rest and a meal.

"The nearest village is a long way off," observed Bharak. "Too far for the smoke from a fire to be seen."

"It's as good a place as we'll find," said Gundar.

He dropped his bundle by the side of a tinkling, spring-fed stream, in the shelter of a grove of kusum trees whose fresh foliage glowed a rich, bright russet in the sunlight. Drawing his kirpan, he began stripping bark from the nearest tree for kindling, while his cousin set about collecting dry wood, and in a matter of minutes the fire was lighted on a foundation of rocks. Khan had wandered off, grazing on the fresh grass by the water's edge, while Gundar and Bharak busied themselves making chapatis—coarse cakes of flour and water—which they baked on the flat stones under the ashes of their fire.

These, together with the plantains, cooked as a vegetable in the manner of their people, made a good meal for the boys, accustomed as they were to the frugal living of the hill people, and cooking was a task in which they were

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skilled, as while in the school hostel in Khandrapur they had had to do their own housekeeping and prepare their own food, with the older boys helping the younger ones.

For several hours the pair rested, basking in the heat of the sun-warmed hillside. But they dared not sleep, as they were still within the man-eater's territory. Gundar did not think the tiger would venture so far from the valley floor, but they could not be sure, and so they remained alert, watching Khan. They knew the young bull would give them warning of any danger long before they themselves became aware of it.

The afternoon passed peacefully, and with the coolness of evening, they moved on again, heading for a high pass over which they could cross into the next valley.

"We'll be out of danger there," said Gundar as they walked. "No one would think of looking for us so far from the Khada River Valley."

Next morning they passed beyond the range of the man-eating tiger and felt that it would be safe to sleep on the ground, with Khan tethered on the end of a long, plaited grass rope. The lame bull could have broken free with the greatest of ease, but Gundar knew he would not try, and both boys felt more secure with the massive young buffalo close at hand.

For days the trio wandered, their steps taking them higher into the hills, toward the pass which had seemed so remote from their home in the valley. Gundar, who had always loved the jungle and the hills, felt as much at home here as by his own fireside, and more so because Bharak was with him to share his experiences and his happiness. For Khan the days passed much as they always had, except that he had to spend the nights in the open instead of in the warmth of the village cattle shed. To a buffalo bred of the great

wild arna, however, such a thing could hardly be considered a hardship.

Food was not plentiful, but there was enough for two boys who had lived all their lives in the hills. Grass was plentiful for Khan, while Gundar and Bharak found a sufficient supply of nuts and fruit with which to eke out their small store of flour and dried beans. Roots, too, were available for those who knew where to find them and, occasionally, when they camped near a lake or a stream, they were able to catch fish. Gundar was quite an expert at this as Balu Lal, Chandra Lal's son, had taught him a good deal. Sometimes he could even take a trout with his bare hands—a feat which had always eluded Bharak.

"It's not difficult," he said one day, when they were camping among clumps of rose and white flowered balsam beside a fast-flowing stream. "Just as long as you don't let the fish know you're there." He pointed to a tumbled pile of mossy boulders jutting from the bank. "See the pool behind those rocks? That's where the trout like to lie and rest. And they always face into the current, so if you walk upstream you'll come on them from behind and they won't see you."

"It *sounds* easy," said Bharak doubtfully.

"No more talking," warned Gundar. "Or we'll scare them."

Walking softly, Gundar led the way, and there in the quiet water behind the rocks, just as he had predicted, lay the sleek, speckled form of a trout, its fins waving gently. It was not big but, wrapped in leaves and clay and baked under the fire, it would make a welcome change in their diet.

"It's too far from the bank," whispered Bharak. "How will you reach it?"

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Gundar smiled. "Watch!" he ordered, and slipped silently into the stream.

Wading knee-deep, taking care not to splash, Gundar approached the fish. He looked up at the sky. The sun was shining full in his face so it would cast no shadow over his victim. Slowly, with infinite caution, he reached forward, one hand passing under the trout's tail so carefully that the movement was scarcely noticeable. Then, suddenly, he scooped upward, his fingers digging into the fish's gills, and a moment later he had the trout firmly gripped in both hands. Triumphantly he waded back to the bank.

"I don't think I'll ever learn," Bharak shook his head wistfully.

"Patience is all you need," Gundar told him. "As long as you can find a fish, of course. That's not always so easy."

Occasionally they were able to spear the big silvery mah-seer and other large fish—which Bharak could do. They also caught smaller fish in a basket trap which they had made from thin, pliable tree branches, and which they set close to the banks where lake-dwelling fish were likely to be feeding at dawn and dusk.

Often, during their few idle moments, they watched the great grey langurs and the smaller, grizzled grey-brown rhesus monkeys as they fed in the treetops. And they noted carefully which fruits they ate and which they avoided, as Bharak's father, Kala Singh, had often told them that what is safe for a monkey to eat is usually safe for a man. In this way they learned a good deal and were able to add to their diet.

But as they mounted higher, the nights became colder, and they were forced to huddle together in the folds of both blankets.

"I'll be glad when we're over the pass," murmured Bharak, his teeth chattering.

Gundar shivered and nodded. "We'll be there in a day or two."

He spoke confidently, but more than once in the last few days he had begun to wish they had stayed at home. He knew Bharak felt the same way, although his cousin would never admit it. But each time he heard Khan's contented lowing, he thrust the thought aside. They had had no choice, he told himself. It had to be this way, and he and Bharak crawled closer to their fire, behind the windbreak of leafy branches they had built.

So time passed and the character of the jungle changed. This high forest was like nothing they had ever seen before. Gone was the lush green of the semi-tropical jungle, to be replaced by the harsh grey-green of gnarled and moss-cloaked oak trees. There were forests of deodar—the Indian cedar—with their gracefully drooping branches, tall and dark in the cold season of early spring.

Gundar liked the clear crispness of the deodar forests, but the oak woods held little appeal as the trees, with their thick covering of moss, gave an impression of incredible age, and their silence was the silence of things long dead. He shuddered slightly and moved closer to Khan, his footfalls making no sound in the carpet of spongy green. A scent of decay pervaded these woods where tattered streamers of dripping moss hung from every bough, and where even the rocks were deep in mud and spread with a clinging drapery of lichens.

"I don't like this place," muttered Bharak, echoing Gundar's thoughts. "It feels so strange."

"That's because it's so quiet," replied Gundar, his voice low, as though afraid to break the silence. "Khan doesn't

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care for it, either," he added, placing a hand on the young bull's neck, as the buffalo was showing obvious signs of agitation.

But the oak woods were passed at last and higher still the deodars mingled with sharp-scented spruce. Here, where a fresh dusting of snow lay over the forest, the hornless musk deer roamed and the tiny bucks, dark-brown and tusked, paused to hiss their alarm before vanishing on hoofs which clicked like castanets as they moved.

It was too cold to sleep at night at that altitude where winter still held sway; where frost sparkled on every branch and the spruce needles were rimed with white. So the two boys and Khan travelled on through the hours of darkness, lighted on their way by the stars, huge and scintillating in the clear, crisp air, and by the bright light of a crescent moon. And they rested during the day when the sun was at its height and warmed the bed of spruce needles which Gundar and Bharak made for themselves, while the young buffalo found what grazing he could.

In this way they reached and crossed the pass, where the great snowfields of the higher ranges loomed so close that they could clearly see the long plumes of snow feathering like wind-blown banners from the crest of each ridge.

Then they were over the top and moving down the other side, and Gundar breathed a deep sigh of relief as he saw the forests spread out below him. Now, at last, they were safe from pursuit.

Smiling, he looked down over the valley—a valley such as the one in which they had always lived, with a river and a few scattered villages and vast forests of sal, now ablaze with copper and gold, and touched here and there with the light green of their fresh spring foliage.

"I'll never complain about the heat of summer again,"

declared Bharak laughingly, his eyes on the jungle below. "I never thought it could be so cold."

Gundar smiled. "Next time we travel so high, we must do it in the summer."

"I hope there won't ever be a next time," returned Bharak with asperity.

This carefree existence was to end, however, as their supply of flour ran out. They had been forced to use more of it during the past few days since food was scarce at the high altitude of the pass, and all they had left was a single handful of dried beans. These they made into soup, adding to it the young coils of ferns, shoots of bamboo and anything else they could find. But though food was more plentiful in the valley forests it was only enough to supplement the chapatis they had made, and by itself it was barely sufficient to keep them alive.

And so, as time passed, the pangs of hunger grew steadily worse.

"We could try to find work among the villages," Bharak suggested.

Gundar shook his head. "If we do, word of it would get back to the Khada Valley and our fathers would come for us," he pointed out.

He knew well enough that two boys accompanied by a lame buffalo would be sure to cause comment, and so they kept clear of the more settled parts of the valley.

"But what else can we do, Gundar," protested Bharak. "We must have food. . . ."

They had tried to spear the red jungle fowl several times and once Gundar had struck feathers from the tail of a peacock. But that was the nearest they had come to making a kill, as the smaller animals—squirrels, martens and mon-gooses—had always proved far too quick for them. By dint

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of much searching in holes and under tree roots they managed to corner a porcupine, but that had been their only success. They had not yet tried trapping, mainly because they were constantly on the move and it would be impossible to set traps or snares without first gaining a thorough knowledge of the locality and its inhabitants. In addition, their families were farmers and hunters, not trappers, and so they knew little of this art.

Reflecting on these failures, Gundar resolved to try for some larger game. "This is the dry season and animals must drink," he told Bharak. "So if we move nearer to the river we might have better luck. And a deer or some bigger creature would make an easier target than a jungle fowl."

"It's worth trying," said Bharak doubtfully.

With this idea in mind they made their way down to the swamps in the upper part of the valley floor. This was where the creatures of the forest would come to drink, but even so it was late in the evening of the second day when, moving cautiously upwind, they at last heard the grunting of wild pigs rooting among the reed beds.

Gundar's eyes gleamed in anticipation and his grip tightened on the shaft of his spear, but he knew they would be very lucky if they could kill one of those wary beasts.

"We must try, though," he muttered, squaring his shoulders in determination. "If we don't have meat we shall surely starve."

The Sambar Stag

Pinpointing the pigs' position, Gundar and Bharak made their plans.

"If I were to move upwind of them they'd get my scent and stampede," said Bharak.

"But there's no knowing which way they'd go," pointed out Gundar, practically. "And if I waited in the wrong place we'd get no second chance."

"If only we had a gun," murmured Bharak. "It would be so much easier."

"But we haven't," rejoined Gundar, "so we must get close."

"There's plenty of cover."

Gundar nodded, his expression thoughtful. "Perhaps, if we kept a few yards apart while stalking them, one of us might get near enough."

"It's the only way," said Bharak.

"Be careful," warned Gundar as the two separated, leaving Khan to graze a short distance away.

Scooping up a handful of dust, he let it trickle through his fingers. There was hardly a breath of wind, but he had

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to be sure of its direction. Satisfied at last, he moved on, slipping through the matted vegetation and mud with a silence which only those born and bred in the jungle can achieve.

For several yards he made good progress, and was beginning to feel hopeful when a slight eddy of the breeze carried either his own scent or Bharak's in the direction of their quarry. It was only the merest breath of air, but it was enough. Instantly the old sow nearest Gundar threw up her head, nostrils quivering.

Gundar froze, since she looked uncertain, and he waited for her to resume feeding, but she did not do so. Instead she squealed, whirled, and pounded away with her thin tail erect, taking the others with her. With a shrill cry of disappointment Bharak burst from cover and raced in pursuit. But he was no match for the pigs and the whole herd of swine vanished from sight among the dense thickets of reeds and swamp grass.

"They're too wary," he muttered.

"Maybe next time we'll be more fortunate," said Gundar consolingly as they plunged on through the mud, followed by Khan.

Ill-fortune seemed to dog the cousins' footsteps, however, and time and again they knew the frustration of seeing their prey—a deer or a pig—throw up its head and dash to safety mere seconds before either was within spear-throwing range.

Once they spotted a pangolin, whose horny scales made it look like a gigantic, animated pine cone with a thick tail and clawed feet. It was just emerging from its burrow and Bharak leaped to his feet.

"Wait!" breathed Gundar. "Let it get away from its hole."

But he was too late. The scaly pangolin had seen Bharak's

movement, and with a powerful thrust of its forefeet it vanished again.

Bharak returned to the tree trunk on which he had been sitting. "We'll never get it now," he declared miserably. "I'm sorry, Gundar."

"We'll find something soon," returned Gundar, trying his best to sound cheerful.

But the loss of the pangolin was a bitter blow, and he knew they could not hope to dig it out since its burrow would probably be all of twelve feet deep. It was no use waiting, either, as it would not come to the surface again so long as they remained nearby.

And then, when they had almost given up hope, their luck changed. It was on a warm, bright morning, following a night of wind and showers of rain, when Gundar spotted a sambar feeding alone in an open glade. It was a large beast; an old stag with antlers fairly well developed although still encased in their covering of grey velvet, which would remain until the rutting season came and the bone hardened. For the moment, however, these formidable weapons were useless, and the clearing in which the animal fed was surrounded by dense thickets of tangled thorn bushes, brambles and nettles.

"It's in a good place," whispered Bharak, his eyes aglow with anticipation.

"The glade is small," replied Gundar. "It's bound to come near the edge soon."

"And when it does we'll be waiting for it."

"Come on," Gundar's tone was urgent. "This is the best chance we've had. We mustn't waste it."

The glade was an ideal place for an ambush and, with all the stealth of which they were capable, Gundar and Bharak crept forward. Not a leaf rustled, not a twig cracked and the unsuspecting sambar went on quietly feeding. A sudden

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slight scurry of rain swept the glade as Gundar paused. But the stag paid no attention.

Slowly it moved on across the clearing, raising its head at every few steps to look and listen. But those delicate, quivering nostrils caught no scent of the boys crouching low under the bushes. No sound alerted the pricked and swivelling ears. Still as the earth itself, Gundar and Bharak waited, a few feet apart from each other and poised under a tangle of intertwined branches.

For almost an hour the wary old stag remained right out in the open, but then it spotted a particularly juicy patch of herbage close to Gundar's hiding place. He tensed, his spear drawn back, but the sambar was suspicious of the thick cover. It threw up its head to sniff the air, but still no eddy revealed the boys' presence and the stag picked its way daintily forward once more.

It was barely thirty feet from Gundar and moving closer. He gathered himself for the throw. Twenty-five feet, and still he waited. He had to be sure this time. The sambar took another pace, dropping its head to feed, and Gundar leaped to his feet. The spear hurtled from his hand.

He had chosen the moment well, but even so, his throw was just a fraction of a second too late. With a single sharp bark of alarm the stag took off, with the weapon still buried in its flank.

Gundar sank back on his heels, with despair etching deep lines on his young features. The sambar's wound was serious, he knew, but the animal would live for hours, maybe even for days, and in that time it would cover many miles. Gundar was sure they would never be able to find it again. And it had taken his spear with it.

Bharak rose to his feet slowly. He had been too far away to do anything, and in those few seconds all their hopes had

been shattered, leaving both boys in the grip of despair such as they had never known before.

"Oh, what can we do?" groaned Gundar, burying his face in his hands.

For some minutes he gave himself up to a feeling of utter hopelessness. But then Khan's soft muzzle nudged against his shoulder, urging him to his feet. For a time he took no notice, but the young bull persisted and at last he came out of his gloomy reverie. Pulling himself together he stood up.

"This is no way to act," he muttered angrily to Bharak. "We must make one last effort—for Khan's sake. He would not give in so easily."

Reaching up he fondled the buffalo's muzzle and then turned abruptly, striding away along the path taken by the sambar.

"We'll never find it," Bharak's tone was despondent.

"We will. We've got to," retorted Gundar grimly.

Many hours later they were still on the trail of the wounded stag, and all the time their progress was becoming slower as the animal wandered, first over hard ground and then into the waters of a shallow stream.

By nightfall, though they had not sighted their quarry, the marks of its passage showed they were close behind. As a result they were forced to camp closer to the swamps than they liked, and during the hours of darkness they were tormented by vast clouds of mosquitoes.

"It's good to be free of them," said Gundar with heartfelt relief, as he crept out from under his blanket next morning.

"It's not good to sleep so close to the swamps," declared Bharak. "If only we could eat butterflies," he added, pointing to a multi-hued carpet of dozens of the gaudy insects, which had settled on a sun-warmed patch of damp sand a short distance away.

"But we— Listen!" Gundar broke off suddenly.

"An otter!" exclaimed Bharak as the shrill, mewling call came again. "But what use is that to us?" He shrugged. "We could never catch such a creature."

Gundar was not listening, however. He was staring toward a reedy bank rising from a deeper part of the swamp.

"They're after the mugger," he said suddenly.

Bharak followed his gaze. A small, half-grown mugger crocodile lay on the bank, with two otters worrying it.

"If they kill it we may be able to take it from them," explained Gundar, seeing his cousin's puzzled frown. "Crocodile may not be the best of eating, but it will be better than nothing."

Bharak looked at the otters with a new interest. They were using the same technique as the mongoose, except that while one of the sleek, dark creatures held the mugger's attention the other would dart in and slash at its neck from the opposite side.

"What happens if it reaches the water?" he asked, as the reptile was thrashing furiously from side to side, obviously trying to regain its natural element.

"Wait and see," returned Gundar.

And they did not have to wait long, as with a sudden rush the crocodile reached a pool and dived in. The otters followed and the deadly game of attack and retreat went on. But in a matter of minutes it was all over and the two little mammals were struggling valiantly to drag their monstrous victim ashore.

"Let's go," rapped Gundar and plunged down through the mud and reeds, heading for the otters' bank.

A tall grey heron started up with a harsh cry and a brown terrapin slipped from a mossy boulder. Gundar found the going harder than he had expected. The mud was deep

and clinging and before long he found he was sinking dangerously deep.

"We'll have to go around," gasped Bharak.

But there was no way around. The bank was right in the middle of the swamp and completely unapproachable.

"It's no use," panted Gundar at last, dragging himself from the mud and squatting exhausted among the thick reeds of the bankside. "We'll have to go on after the sambar. That's our only hope."

Bharak nodded wearily. But although they stuck to their task with all the skill they possessed it was almost midday before they noticed a big, pale brown griffon vulture planing across the floor of the valley. It flapped for a moment, regaining its balance as it braked with extended legs, before settling in the branches of a silk-cotton tree on a low hillock a quarter of a mile away. Gundar stared hard at the tree and made out the hunched and hideous shapes of half a dozen other bare-headed vultures already perching there.

"It must be close," murmured Gundar, with a sigh of relief.

They started forward again. Perhaps the stag was somewhere among the scrub thickets at the foot of the silk-cotton tree.

The fact that the vultures had not settled should have warned them that they were not alone. But they were young and inexperienced—and they were very hungry. Throwing caution aside they broke into a run, bursting headlong into the tangled scrub.

"There it is!" exclaimed Bharak joyfully.

They spotted the sambar almost immediately, lying still and silent among a clump of thorny plum bushes, with the spear still jutting from its side.

Gundar raced ahead. But it was only as his hand closed

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over the shaft of the weapon that he became aware of movement in the depths of the thickets beyond him. He started back as the massive black form of a bear burst from the shadows. But he was too late. Even as he turned to run, the bear reared up, and its scream of fury mingled with Khan's angry bellowing and Bharak's shouted warning.

Gundar glimpsed the shaggy white V across the bear's chest as he drew his kirpan and prepared to face it. And then his foot caught in a tangle of low branches and he was rolling . . . rolling. . . .

13

The Old Shikari

When Gundar regained consciousness he was lying at the foot of the hillock, with Bharak and a ragged and bearded stranger bending over him.

"Gundar. . . ."

He scarcely heard Bharak's anxious voice as he stared at the newcomer.

"I saw the vultures circling and came to see what they'd found," smiled the man.

Dara Chand was an old shikari, or hunter. He had only one arm and at first both boys were rather afraid of him. But they were hungry, and when he produced food they were only too glad to accept it.

And as he ate, Gundar's head cleared and he remembered the bear. He looked up hesitantly, but before he could speak Dara Chand smiled again and glanced beyond him.

"He's a fine beast," he observed. "And a good friend."

Gundar followed the old man's gaze. One of Khan's horns gleamed red in the bright sunlight.

"He—he killed the bear?" Gundar's voice betrayed the wonder he felt.

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Bharak shook his head. "The bear still lives," he declared. "But it will remember Khan for many a day."

"Khan was fathered by a wild bull," explained Gundar proudly, turning to the shikari.

Dara Chand nodded. "He has the mark of the Striped One on him," he said, his eyes on Khan's damaged leg. "No other creature could have injured him so."

An expression of sadness clouded Gundar's features. "It happened when he was just a calf," he told the shikari, and finding Dara Chand to be a willing listener the two boys could not resist pouring out the whole of their story, how Khan had been sold as tiger bait and how they had run away with the young bull to save him from what had seemed to be a terrible fate.

The old shikari's expression was grave as they finished. "It is not good for ones so young to forsake their people," he declared.

Gundar did not reply. So far neither he nor Bharak had given much thought to their families and friends in the Khada River Valley. But now the thrill of seeing new places, of learning new things and of fending for themselves, had begun to wear off, and they began to think of those they had left behind.

The man-eater was cunning. It had eluded Kala Singh, and it could just as easily elude Peters Sahib, the Englishman. Did the people of the Khada Valley still live under the reign of terror imposed by the tiger? And had any member of their own families fallen victim to the killer? Naida, perhaps? And what of his mother and father? And Bharak's parents? Kala Singh would be out each day with Peters Sahib, hunting for the Striped One.

Rising to his feet, Gundar wandered across to Khan, fondling the lame bull's muzzle. He thought of how he and

Bharak had rescued him and of how the young buffalo had been propped at rope's length. The man-eater had been close by at the time. Perhaps if they had left Khan where he was. . . .

Guessing his thoughts Dara Chand placed his good right hand on the boy's shoulder. "It would have been a great sacrifice on your part, Gundar, but it could have meant the saving of many human lives."

Gundar shrugged. "That may be true," he sighed. "But even had the Striped One taken Khan, Peters Sahib might not have killed him."

Bharak joined the pair. "My father has said many times that the Striped Ones can't always be caught in that way."

The old shikari inclined his head gravely. "The Striped Ones are hard to kill," he agreed. "But when they become killers of men . . ." He paused, looking hard at Gundar before going on: "There is no greater scourge in all the animal kingdom. This I know, since I lived once, many years ago, under the shadow of such an evil one."

Dara Chand turned toward the hills, a faraway look in his eyes. For a long time he remained silent and Gundar and Bharak waited respectfully until he continued.

"Thirty-nine lives the Striped One took," he said at last. "Thirty-nine," he repeated, as though still hardly able to credit the fact. "And for more than two years the people of my own and nearby villages lived in constant terror. No man dared venture out of his house by night. But in the daylight hours, when we did the work we had to do, the Striped One took his toll. We never knew where he would strike next. Every step we took we knew might be our last. Every bamboo clump, every thicket was a thing to fear, as it might hide the evil one. . . ."

Gundar shuddered. His lively imagination made all of it

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seem very real, and suddenly he felt ashamed. He himself, and the people of his village, had lived for a long time under just such a shadow of fear and uncertainty—and if the Striped One still lived, it might be because of his selfishness in removing Khan.

Somewhere down in the valley a leopard rasped its greeting to the shadow of darkness, passing swiftly up into the hills and chasing the last pearly glow from the snows of the higher ranges.

Long after the fire had gone out that night, Gundar and Bharak lay awake, thinking of the Khada River Valley and of the tiger, and wondering . . . Gundar knew they had done wrong in taking Khan and he desperately wanted to return to the village, to his mother and father and Naida. But his father would be angry—terribly angry—and rightly so.

Miserably he kicked at the dead ashes of the fire. If only he had the courage to go back and face them. . . .

For several days Gundar, Bharak and Khan stayed with Dara Chand, wandering through the hills and the jungle, and along the swampy floor of the valley. It was a way of life which Gundar would have enjoyed but for the doubts and fears which nagged him continually.

And then one day Dara Chand turned to the two boys. "We need more flour and some beans," he said. "But Marzabad is a long way and I am old. . . ."

"We'll go," offered Gundar eagerly, and then he hesitated, glancing toward Khan.

Dara Chand smiled. "He'll be safe with me."

"Maybe we'll hear news of the Striped One," said Bharak.

So it was arranged, and early next morning Gundar and Bharak set out for the town of Marzabad, far down at the end of the valley.

"Will it be like Khandrapur?" asked Bharak, since that

was the only town he and Gundar had ever seen, and to visit a new one would be an experience.

"I expect so," replied Gundar. "Dara Chand said it was a small place."

"Khandrapur isn't small," said Bharak indignantly.

"It is compared to some of the big cities my father has told me about," laughed Gundar.

Bharak made a face. "Maybe you're right," he conceded.

They were not left long in doubt, however, as before mid-day they were approaching the telegraph poles set along the road leading into Marzabad. Bharak glanced at the wires overhead where the handsome, glossy black drongos perched, their forked tails endlessly swaying and flicking.

"They make fine perches," he observed.

And a few minutes later they were in the town.

"There's the market place." Gundar pointed to a wide, open square where men, women and children squatted under the shade of the pink and white flowered bauhinias and the golden mohur trees, whose spreading crowns were a riot of red-gold blossoms, mingled at this time of year with the light-green of the fernlike leaves that were just beginning to unfold.

It took only minutes to make their few purchases, but still the boys lingered, wandering along Marzabad's narrow, rutted streets, among the rumbling traffic of covered bullock wagons and bicycles, with here and there a motor vehicle, and the cows, which are considered sacred, and allowed to roam untended in every Indian town. The dozen or so streets made a welcome change after their weeks of wandering in the jungle and over the hills.

"Gundar, look!"

"Quiet!" whispered Gundar, pausing by the corner of a high brick building.

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Two men were seated beyond the angle of the wall and it was their conversation which had brought him to a standstill. Normally he would never have considered eavesdropping, but he had caught the words "Ranjipur" and "Peters Sahib" and he wondered if, by chance, he might hear news of the man-eater.

". . . he returned to Khandrapur a few days ago."

The man's words sent a thrill of hope coursing through Gundar, but it was quickly replaced by a wave of dread as the voice went on: "My brother was there at the time and he says the evil one still lives."

"Then Peters Sahib must have failed. Ah, but the Striped Ones become so cunning once they take to the killing of men. . . ."

"This one bears a charmed life," returned the first man. "Twice it returned to a kill over which Peters Sahib was waiting, but each time it escaped. The first time a storm of wind sprang up in the night and the tree in which his machan was placed became so insecure that he wasn't able to shoot. The second time a pack of wild dogs went by and the evil one was gone before he could take aim."

"The Striped One is still alive," muttered Gundar, his fists clenched, as he and Bharak turned away.

"But Peters Sahib will return. He must return . . ." said Bharak tensely.

Suddenly all the pleasure had gone out of their visit to Marzabad, and the boys turned back toward the jungle where they had left Dara Chand.

The old shikari noticed the change in them and he nodded as they explained. "Such is often the case," he declared.

Gundar stared up at the twisted branches of the dhak trees under which Dara Chand had established his camp. As always flocks of birds of many kinds squabbled over each

contorted and leafless limb, where the vermilion flowers shimmered with a silvery sheen—flowers which give to this tree its well-deserved English name of flame of the forest.

But Gundar was not interested in the birds. He was looking at the old shikari. "Dara Chand—the evil one of which you spoke—how did he die?"

Dara Chand raised the stump of his left arm. "Am I not a shikari—a hunter?" he said proudly. "I hunted the Striped One and took his life, even as he had taken the lives of so many of my people."

"And—he did that to you?" breathed Gundar, looking in awe at the shikari's arm.

"He caught my wrist in his jaws as he died," said Dara Chand. "Afterward I was very ill and my people took me to an army post where there was an English doctor. He cut off my arm and said that would make me well again." The old shikari shrugged in a gesture of resignation: "He was right, of course, and he saved my life. But what use is a hunter with only one arm?"

"That's why you left your people—why you live out here, alone, in the hills?" asked Bharak.

"I stayed with my people for a long time afterward," replied Dara Chand. "But I was a young man at the time and their years were greater than mine. One by one they passed on, and the younger people had no use for such as I, since I was a cripple and growing old in my turn. So I left them and came out here to the hills and the jungle, where the beasts and the birds are my friends. All except the Striped Ones." The old shikari flexed his stump of an arm. "And yet all the Striped Ones are not evil," he went on. "Many times I've come upon one which had just killed and was feeding, and always they've let me go on my way with but a growl of warning."

"How did you slay the evil one?" asked Gundar eagerly.

Dara Chand had become something of a hero in the eyes of both boys as, indeed, would any man who had fought and conquered the Lord of the Jungle, and their curiosity was aroused. Dara Chand glanced down at the spear he carried. "This is the weapon which took the Striped One's life, as I had no gun," he said simply.

For the first time, Gundar noticed that the shaft of the spear was bound with wire. Evidently the weapon had been snapped off short during Dara Chand's desperate struggle with the tiger.

The old shikari saw his glance and went on to explain: "When the evil one sprang at me I placed the butt against the ground, thus." Dara Chand demonstrated how he had held the seven-foot spear at an angle in front of him. "And he impaled himself upon it."

Gundar took a deep breath. He could picture the scene as though it were happening before his own eyes, and he looked at the old shikari with a new and deeper respect. To kill one of the mighty Striped Ones with a gun was one thing, but to accomplish this feat with nothing but a spear. . . .

For a long time Gundar and Bharak were silent, both thinking of Dara Chand and the tiger he had killed. And then, suddenly, Gundar glanced at his own spear. It was a stout weapon, as good as that of the old shikari. And if Dara Chand could kill one of the dreaded Striped Ones with such a weapon why should not he, Gundar, do the same?

The more he thought about it the more Gundar liked the idea. If he took the life of the man-eater then surely he would be welcomed by the people of his village. His father could not be angry with him if he had performed such a deed. His father. . . .

Fears came crowding back into Gundar's mind. Would Raman Singh still be alive? And the others—how had they fared over the past weeks and months?

Resolutely, Gundar thrust aside such thoughts. "If the Striped One still lives I'll hunt him down," he whispered to Khan as the lame bull ambled to his side. "In this way I may put right the great wrong I've done."

Rising to his feet, Bharak came across, and Gundar could see from the look on his face that he had been thinking along the same lines.

"Gundar," he said now, hesitantly. "Gundar, I think the time has come when we should return to our people. . . ."

"We've been away far too long," agreed his cousin. "I'm sorry, Bharak," he added simply. "I should never have left in the first place. The fault was all mine."

"No one made me go with you," returned Bharak staunchly.

That evening both boys felt happier than they had for some time, and Bharak was humming to himself as he and Gundar prepared chapatis for themselves and Dara Chand from flour supplied by the old hunter.

"You're cheerful tonight," remarked the shikari, again quick to notice the change in his young companions.

"We have been thinking about what you said," explained Gundar earnestly. "And we believe you were right. We must return to our people."

"It is only right that we should do so, as we've been the cause of too much suffering already," added Bharak.

A smile wrinkled Dara Chand's bearded features. "That's good," he said. "You won't regret such a decision."

Gundar turned away, placing his hand on Khan's shoulder. He had made no mention of his resolve to hunt down the Ranjipur tiger before he returned to his village and his

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family. Not even Bharak knew of this decision. He would have to tell his cousin, of course, but that could wait until later.

"But I will do it," he vowed, "even though I die in the attempt."

14

Fire in the Forest

So it was that Gundar and Bharak took their leave of Dara Chand and headed back over the pass toward the Khada River Valley.

Bharak looked anxious, however. "What can we say to our people?" he muttered as they walked. "They'll be terribly angry."

"I'm not going back," said Gundar flatly. "Not yet, anyway."

Bharak stared at him. "But, Gundar, you told Dara Chand. . . ."

"I know, and I will return. But first I will kill the Striped One."

Bharak came to a halt. "What are you saying, Gundar?" he asked, as though unable to believe his ears.

"I said I must kill the Striped One before I return," repeated Gundar. "Bharak, it's the only way," he went on with a rush. "I was wrong to take Khan and wrong to leave the village. By killing the evil one I might make up for some of the trouble I've caused."

"But if my father and Peters Sahib can't kill the Striped

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One," protested Bharak, "how can we hope to succeed?"

"I must do it alone," Gundar told him. "You'll have to go back to your family, Bharak. You've risked too much already."

"If I go back, then I'll tell my father what you're planning, Gundar," countered his cousin. "To tackle such a beast alone would be certain death. I won't let you do it—but together, with Khan to help us. . . ."

"But you can't, Bharak . . ." It was Gundar's turn to protest. He had no illusions about the risk he was planning to take and he had no wish to involve his cousin.

Bharak was adamant, however. "I can, and I will," he declared, and at last Gundar had to give in, realizing that further argument was futile.

It was good to have such a companion as Bharak, he reflected.

"But how will we do it?" his cousin wanted to know.

"We must wait and see," said Gundar. "Remember, Bharak, we'll have much more time than Peters Sahib. More even than your father. And because of this we might succeed."

Deep in thought, with Khan following behind, the two pushed on into the hills. But now the character of the high places had changed, since in the past few days winter had ended and spring had come to the mountains. Squirrels chattered and scolded from the branches and the song of birds rang through the brown aisles of the forests. In the grassy meadows between dense ranks of spruce and cedar a carpet of alpine flowers—primulas, poppies, anemones, irises and countless others—was bursting into bloom. Even the oak woods had lost some of their grimness, as they were lighted here and there by the blaze of crimson rhododendrons, while the air was heavy with the scent of magnolia.

All this Gundar and Bharak saw as they and Khan moved on over the pass and down toward the shining ribbon of the Khada, dwindling under the merciless sun of the hot season before the rains. But Gundar found this beauty a distraction. All his thoughts were concentrated on getting down into the valley far below, and on finding the tiger he was determined to kill.

"I must do it," he told himself over and over again when he found his resolve beginning to weaken. "It's the only way."

And so they went on, with Khan limping beside them like some huge and faithful dog. The young bull had filled out as he grew toward full maturity during their weeks of wandering and he was now a really magnificent animal, bigger by far than the herd bull owned by Bharak's father.

Gundar sighed as he looked at the massive black creature. "Ah, if only the Striped One had not become filled with an evil spirit, then Khan would never have been lamed and soon he would have taken his rightful place in our village herd."

"Gundar, do you think it is wise for us to tackle the evil one by ourselves?" asked Bharak suddenly, voicing the thought which had been with him for some days now, ever since he had had time to consider seriously Gundar's wild scheme.

"I've got to try," said Gundar firmly, coming out of his reverie. "But I cannot expect you to come with me, Bharak."

"I think it is madness to attempt such a thing," said Bharak. "But I can't let you do it alone."

In this way the matter was left, as Bharak knew only too well how stubborn Gundar could be once he made up his mind, and when he felt that he had a debt to repay.

Picking their path over ridges and through high valleys

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the trio dropped steadily down toward the rich green of the jungle below. But to Gundar it seemed they would never reach the main valley floor. He was anxious to come to grips with the tiger as soon as possible, as he was terribly afraid of the beast and he wanted to end the matter one way or the other. Many times on their journey back he was tempted to give up his reckless idea, but his pride would not let him.

And at last they came back to the jungle, seared by the pitiless sun of early summer. The heat as the sun passed its zenith was almost intolerable, especially for Khan, and they were forced to rest during the midday hours. Whenever possible they halted by the side of a stream or a forest pool so the young bull could find some relief in the cool water he loved. But most of the streams had long since dried up and pools were few and far between. Most of the time they had to make do with what shade they could find under the wilting jungle trees. Everywhere insects swarmed. It was impossible to get away from them except where there was water in which to lie.

It was on just such a stifling day, when they were resting in the shade of a clump of golden bamboo, that Khan began to show signs of restlessness. At first the boys took little notice, thinking the young bull was merely irritated by the heat. But when the usually silent animal began to bellow in obvious agitation, and back away from the bamboo clump out into the blazing sun, Gundar began to feel uneasy.

"Something's wrong," he muttered, half to himself. "But what is it? If only Khan could speak."

Bharak peered into the depths of the forest. "Could it be a panther, perhaps? Or the Striped One?"

"It can't be the evil one," rejoined Gundar, as he knew they had not yet entered the man-eater's territory and tigers

seldom venture into the hunting grounds of another of their own species.

But this area might well be the home of another of the great cats and so both boys searched the jungle around them, without spotting whatever might be upsetting Khan.

A big civet cat, brownish-yellow, barred and spotted in a darker hue, slipped past, and Gundar frowned. It was unusual for such a creature to be abroad during daylight hours and particularly in such intense heat.

He became even more puzzled a few minutes later when he actually saw a tiger. That it was not the man-eater was apparent at once, as it was a young animal, richly striped, and it had no trace of a limp.

"The Striped Ones have no love of the heat," muttered Bharak. "So why would it be abroad at this time of day?"

Gundar, too, was watching the big cat, as he knew that tigers usually try to find water in which to lie and cool off during the hottest hours of the day. Not only that, but this one was walking fast, its head hung low and jaws apart, and it was looking neither right nor left.

"It seems strange." Gundar shook his head in perplexity.

He glanced at Khan, and to his surprise the young bull seemed eager to move off in the same direction as the tiger had taken.

"Look, Gundar!" Bharak pointed upward.

The sun, which had been shining brightly only a few minutes before, had disappeared behind a coppery haze. And even as Gundar noticed the change he caught a sudden whiff of burning wood.

"Fire!" he exclaimed. "Somewhere between here and the river. Come on, Bharak! We must hurry—back to the fire line!"

Khan needed no urging. He responded immediately as

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Gundar placed a hand on his shoulder and turned back toward the hills.

Neither Gundar nor Bharak was unduly worried, however. Forest fires were common during early summer, when the jungle was parched by a merciless sun and every leaf and stick was as dry as tinder. And they knew they would be safe if they could reach the fire line—a wide swathe cut through the forest for the purpose of isolating any fire which might break out, and which they had crossed earlier that day. Just the same they did not intend to take needless risks and they moved upward at the best speed Khan could manage.

At first, their path lay through the organized sal forests where creepers were few and the undergrowth sparse. The going was easy and they made good progress, but then, in a small valley straddling a nullah with a hint of moisture still in its bed in spite of the fierce heat, they came to a stretch of heavy jungle. It was impossible to go around, the hills on either side being too steep for the lame bull to negotiate. So they had to go on, using their kirpans to hack a path through a dense tangle of rattan canes, the climbing palms with stems hundreds of feet long whose fish-hook thorns whipped down and tore at their shoulders with every movement they made.

His face streaked with sweat, Gundar paused for a moment.

"We must move faster," said Bharak.

"We're nearly through," Gundar assured him.

More animals began to appear. First a dark-maned sambar stag, then a little russet barking deer no bigger than a spaniel, slipping through the thickets with all the ease of a cat. A small herd of spotted chital followed, and to Gundar's horror all of them were moving at right angles across their path.

"The fire must be spreading to the side," Bharak's voice carried a note of alarm.

"Stay with Khan," ordered Gundar, his eyes on the young bull.

Automatically Khan plunged in the wild creatures' wake, following the path beaten out by the sambar stag. The boys went with him, and for the first time Gundar began to grow really uneasy. The fire line was still more than two miles distant and it would take some time to reach it over such rough and difficult country.

The heat under the thick canopy of leaves seemed to have grown more intense, but from the floor of the jungle they could see no more than a few yards in any direction.

A sprawling banyan tree towered up through the leafy roof ahead of them, and throwing down his bundle, Gundar ran toward it.

"I'll take a look," he shouted over his shoulder, and swung himself into its branches.

Climbing with the agility of a monkey, he soon reached a vantage point from which he could see over the surrounding jungle. And what he saw filled him with a fear such as he had seldom known before. Behind him and on both sides rose billowing clouds of smoke, rolling toward him in white-crested waves.

"It's moving so fast—faster than any fire I've ever seen," he muttered, and scrambled back down the tree.

"Where is it?" Bharak looked at him anxiously.

"All around us," panted Gundar. "But if we hurry we might just reach the fire line before it closes ahead of us."

Breaking into a run, the two boys caught up with Khan and urged the young buffalo to even greater speed. A troop of langurs sailed past and Gundar envied the ease and rapidity of their flight through the treetops. The sky, when they

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could catch a glimpse of it through some break in the green canopy, was almost blotted out by a thick haze of smoke.

The sharp tang of burning wood was heavy in the air. The heat grew more intense with every passing minute, and Gundar suddenly saw that the fire was moving faster than Khan could travel. He had seen from the top of the banyan tree that one arm of smoke was reaching between them and the fire line, and he knew that all hope of reaching this refuge had gone, as flames were already flaring over the trees ahead of them.

"Gundar, what can we do?" cried Bharak in sudden fear.

"Follow the animals," gasped Gundar. "That's our only hope. If there is a clearing or a pool, they may know of it."

The forests on this side of the Khada were strange to Gundar and Bharak and they were both close to panic, since the fire line was the only place they knew which could have offered a chance of escape. But now that chance was gone, and there was nothing they could do but follow blindly after Khan in the hope that the jungle creatures in whose wake he was travelling might lead them to a place of safety. . . .

Mark of the Striped One

Gundar and Bharak could both hear the roar and crackle of the fire, punctuated by the sharp cracks of exploding bamboo. Sparks floated down through air so hot and dry, it rasped in their throats as they stumbled along. Insects, dazed and bewildered by the heat, dashed against their faces, while overhead hundreds of birds—mynahs, drongos and tumbling blue rollers—feasted on the teeming swarms.

Ahead of Khan, a thicket of tinder-dry plum bushes burst into flame and the young bull shied away. The two boys followed and the trio crashed out into a small open glade. Jungle- and peafowl scattered in a wild flurry of wings and startled squawks as they dashed past, and then the two boys and Khan were into the jungle once more, stumbling blindly through the tangled thickets. A blazing branch crashed to the ground at Bharak's feet, showering him with sparks, but he scarcely noticed it. He glanced back over his shoulder and gasped at the searing blast of air which struck him.

"We're finished!" he choked, clinging desperately to Khan.

"Keep going, Bharak." Gundar's voice was little more

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than a hoarse croak. "There must be a way. We can't give up."

The young bull bellowed in fright as a billowing wave of smoke engulfed them, pierced by tongues of flame. But even as it seemed they must go under, the jungle opened out ahead of them and gave way to a sea of grass—grass which appeared startlingly green against the frothing crimson and yellow and black.

Gundar felt himself falling. Head over heels he rolled down a steep slope, to stop with a bone-jarring thud in a thick bed of reeds at the bottom.

"Bharak, we're safe!" The exclamation was torn from him as he picked himself up and realized he was spattered with mud. "Come on! There's open water farther out."

New hope surged through both boys as they snatched up their bundles and stumbled on after Khan. This was the one place in the jungle which could offer any hope of safety—a wide stretch of swamp which had retained some moisture throughout the scorching weeks of the dry season, enough to keep the shoulder-high grass fresh and green. Gundar knew it would not burn, but he thought he could see the gleam of deeper water farther on and he and Bharak pushed their way forward.

A clump of bamboo on the bank exploded with a rattle of sound, echoing like gunfire over the roar of the fire. Sparks hissed as they fell on the mud, while the heat, like a blast from a furnace, drove the boys on. Bellowing in panic, Khan stumbled after them and the three burst out into a reed-fringed pool.

Half-choked by the swirling clouds of smoke, Gundar glanced about him. His eyes smarted and he could not see very well, but as a sudden hot gust swept the smoke aside for an instant, he saw that he and Bharak and Khan were

not the only ones seeking refuge in the pool. A small herd of elephants—a tusker and three cows, one with a half-grown youngster—stood a bare hundred yards away, scooping water over themselves in cascades.

"There's the Striped One we saw earlier today," remarked Bharak, and Gundar followed his cousin's gaze.

The tiger cowered in the deep grass on the opposite side, and Gundar noticed its glance switch as a sudden shrill scream rang over the appalling din of the fire. A blazing ember, whirling high over the swamp, had struck one of the elephants, and they saw the frightened beast squirt a trunkful of water over its singed hide.

Sambar, chital and barking deer were there, too, huddled in a terrified group as far away as they could get from the tiger.

Gundar glanced at them. "The Striped One won't harm them while the fire burns," he declared.

"But they don't know that," said Bharak. "Gundar, will we be safe here? It's getting hotter."

Bharak's final remark was prompted by a fresh shower of sparks. The smoke closed in again, thicker than ever.

"Keep down in the water," suggested Gundar. "It won't seem so bad then."

Both boys cowered down beside Khan, and for a time neither spoke. The heat, which had seemed unbearable before, grew in intensity as the full fury of the fire swept around the sides of the swamp. They could see crimson tongues of flame stabbing through the pall of smoke which had clamped down over everything. Blazing embers hissed around them, raising pillars of steam. Even the water had become uncomfortably warm.

The noise grew to a deafening climax and a vast sheet of flame swept out over the swamp. Gundar and Bharak found

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it difficult to breathe as the scorching air rasped in their throats and lungs.

And then, quite suddenly, it was all over. The swirling clouds of smoke passed on, leaving a thick pall of dust and ash. The air was still hot and heavy, but it seemed almost cool after the searing blast of heat. Gundar stood up, and he was trembling as he splashed water over his slim brown body.

"I wouldn't like to go through that again," said Bharak in relief as he followed suit.

Beside them, Khan rolled in the lukewarm mud while the others—tiger, elephant and deer—went their separate ways. The animals could not go far, as the ground in the burned-out forest would be too hot to walk over for some time yet, but the green grass of the swamp extended over a considerable area and each of them would find safety there for a while.

Of necessity, the cousins and Khan also remained among the lush, deep grass, which lay like an emerald oasis amid a sea of glowing stumps. And while they waited their minds turned again to thoughts of the man-eater.

"Gundar, how can we kill the Striped One? We have no guns . . ." Bharak had long since given up hope of persuading his cousin to abandon his wild idea.

"We have our spears," retorted Gundar. "And Dara Chand killed one of the evil ones with such a weapon."

"But Dara Chand is a grown man," protested Bharak. "Besides, look what happened to him," he added with a shudder, thinking of the old shikari's stump of an arm.

Gundar looked at his cousin. "I must face the Striped One alone, Bharak, if that's the only way. I have no wish to see you killed because of my pride and foolishness. But there may be another way. We shall have to wait and see."

At last the ground around the swamp had cooled sufficiently to walk over, although a thick haze of dust still hung in the air, dimming the light of the sun to a coppery, premature dusk. Climbing from among the reeds and mud the two boys found they had to force a path between the shattered trunks of fallen trees, some of them still glowing redly.

"Khan!" Gundar called over his shoulder to the reluctant buffalo. "Come! We can't stay any longer."

Hot dust rose in choking clouds at every movement and after a couple of tentative steps Khan stopped again, bellowing his disapproval.

Bharak laughed. "He knows where his comfort lies."

"Khan!" repeated Gundar, and there was a trace of impatience in his voice as he was anxious to get on now with his self-imposed task, and already the fire had delayed them for a long time.

But the young bull hung back. The cool waters of the swamp seemed far more attractive to him, and he did not like the scent of fire which still hung about.

Losing patience, Gundar walked on ahead while Bharak watched in amusement, and a few moments later Khan followed, voicing his opinion in a mournful bellow which brought a smile to his young master's lips.

Laughing, Gundar slapped the bull's flank. "It won't be for long," he said. "Soon we shall reach the river and the fire won't have crossed to the other side."

"I don't like this any more than Khan," complained the bare-footed Bharak, treading gingerly over the hot ground.

The going was more difficult than Gundar had expected. Fallen, burned-out trees blocked their path so that they had to make frequent detours, and it was not until noon of the

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third day that they finally reached the Khada. Behind them the fire still raged as they could see by the smoke which hung over the northern slopes. But at the opposite side of the river, low and sluggish at this season, with wide sandbanks on either side, they could see billowing waves of untouched greenery.

Thankfully they plunged into the shallow water, glad to be away from the harsh region of dust and ash even though they knew they were back in the man-eater's territory. The man-eater! Gundar's heart began to thump at the thought of the tiger which he had sworn to hunt down and kill.

"Perhaps my uncle has slain the Striped One since Peters Sahib left," he murmured hopefully to himself, as they waded through the reed beds.

But his hopes were soon to be shattered, as scarcely more than an hour later he and Bharak came on the pug marks of a tiger, and Gundar knelt to examine them.

"It is the evil one," he whispered to Bharak, and a cold shiver ran down his spine as he traced out the mark of the turned-in forepaw and splayed-out toes.

"He's cunning, this Striped One, or he could never have escaped my father and Peters Sahib for so long," muttered Bharak, remembering the words of the men in Marzabad.

"The tracks are fresh," said Gundar, as close inspection indicated they had not been made until after the fire had died down on the opposite bank of the river. "See where the ash blown across from the fire has been trodden down into the sand."

Bharak nodded. He could not trust himself to speak, as suddenly he felt very frightened.

"The Striped One must have passed this way within the last few hours," went on Gundar. "Soon after dawn this morning, perhaps."

Mark of the Striped One

He stood up, his fists clenched over the shaft of his spear, and a wave of uncertainty surged through him.

"I must do it," he muttered, trying hard to steel himself against the fear which had gripped him, just as it had gripped Bharak at sight of this proof that they were again in the domain of the man-eater. "I cannot return to my people until the evil one is dead."

He turned, placing a hand on Khan's powerful shoulder and gaining comfort from the lame bull's presence. Then he drew himself erect.

"The Striped One won't be easy to find," he mused, striving to keep his voice steady. "There's plenty of game on this side of the river."

"Many animals were driven across by the fire," Bharak found his voice at last.

"And more will come searching for food," said Gundar.

"The Striped One will be able to make all the kills he needs—for a while, at least," Bharak went on. He realized that even a crippled tiger would have little trouble finding food in a district where game had become so concentrated—at least until such time as the animals dispersed again to fresh haunts.

One thing only would help Gundar and Bharak in their search and that was the continued drought, although clouds piling up on the rim of the plains below indicated that it would break within the next few days. And once the rains came, the wild game would no longer be held within reach of the river.

"We must make a start now—this minute," Gundar decided. "We'll have no better chance."

He glanced again at the tracks. They led down across the sand to the water's edge and then back again. Gundar followed them for a short distance and saw that, once back

under cover, the tiger had turned to walk parallel with the river and just inside the fringe of greenery.

"The Striped One came down to drink," he said to Bharak. "And that's a thing he would not have done had he been hunting."

The tiger was obviously not on the prowl or it would never have come out on to the open sand bar for all the jungle to see. That meant it was not hungry. Gundar thought perhaps it had made a kill on the previous day. Animals escaping from the fire would not be moving with their usual caution and it might well have had the chance of an easy victim.

If it had made a kill and the unfortunate beast was too big to be eaten in one night, then the man-eater might return later on. So Gundar thought as he walked back over the tracks and into the jungle.

"Do we follow?" asked Bharak.

"No," returned Gundar. "That would be foolish."

Bharak nodded, knowing the tiger would almost certainly hide out for the day in some thick cover, possibly in the reed beds where it could escape the heat of the sun. And to follow the beast into such a place would be certain death, as the tiger, lying still, would have every advantage. It would certainly see them long before they reached it, and it would probably be on top of them before they even noticed it.

No, they had to match cunning with cunning, reflected Gundar, and their best chance of coming to grips on something like equal terms would be to ambush the beast over one of its own kills.

"Our best hope would be to back-track along the way the Striped One came," went on Gundar thoughtfully.

"Khan will warn us if the evil one is near," Bharak tried hard to keep his voice steady.

Gundar looked at him. "Bharak, there's still time for you to turn back if you wish. . . ."

"No!" Bharak's tone was decisive this time. There would be no turning back.

"Thank you, Bharak," replied Gundar quietly, and he meant it, as on this wild venture more than at any other time in his life he felt the need of a companion such as Bharak.

So they turned back along the tiger's trail, not following it directly, but circling across it at intervals of a few yards, so that Khan might give them warning if Gundar's calculations had been wrong and the tiger had come back by some other route. Such a thing was unlikely, but they were taking no foolish risks.

And they did not have far to go. Moving with the utmost caution they had covered only a little over half a mile when Khan began to show signs of uneasiness. He was not afraid, as he would have been had the tiger been near, but restless, as though he had scented something he did not like.

Moving out ahead of the lame buffalo, Gundar and Bharak circled the place. A troop of little grey-brown rhesus monkeys peered down at them from the branches, chattering as they passed—a sure sign there was no tiger within their sight or they would have been yelling long before.

Patiently and fearfully, the two boys quartered the area, every sense alert for a sign of the man-eater. But they saw nothing and heard nothing. A golden oriole flashed past, resplendent in gold and black. And then, suddenly, the fierce buzzing of flies drew Gundar's attention to what looked like an untidy pile of leaves and twigs stacked in the thick cover of a clump of feathery bamboo.

"There!" he breathed.

Bharak nodded. "It's covered, so he intends to return."

There was no need to go closer, since they both knew this

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was what they had been looking for. A half-eaten chital hind lay under the pile, well concealed from the prying eyes of vultures.

"If the Striped One comes it will be from the river," whispered Gundar.

He looked about him. A baubinia tree, thickly foliated with a new crop of cloven leaves, overhung the clump of bamboo, and it was on the side away from the river. That would make an ideal place for an ambush.

Bharak glanced at him inquiringly, and the two boys moved away toward a place where they could talk in safety.

As they left, Gundar took a last look at the dead chital. He could think of only one way in which they could kill the man-eater, and the baubinia tree provided them with an almost perfect site.

"Tonight," he breathed, "when the Striped One returns to feed, we shall be ready for him."

16

Night of Waiting

Reaching a quiet spot in the shade of an isolated acacia tree on the river bank, Gundar and Bharak settled down and tried to rest, while Khan grazed nearby.

"You have a plan?" asked Bharak tensely.

"The best and safest way will be to spear the Striped One as he feeds," replied Gundar. "So I shall wait on a branch overhanging the clump of bamboo."

"We'll both wait there," said Bharak. "But, Gundar, is there no other way? Could we trap him, perhaps?"

"Your father couldn't trap him," declared Gundar. "And I don't think we could succeed where he failed. Besides, what kind of a trap could we use?"

"A pit, maybe?"

Gundar shook his head. "A pit to hold the Striped One would have to be so big. Digging it would make too much noise. Besides, we have no tools."

"Could we rig up a deadfall? Khan could help us," persisted Bharak.

Again Gundar shook his head. "Nothing smaller than a fallen tree would do. And there are none anywhere near the

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kill. The evil one is cunning. If Khan were to drag one from any distance away he would hear and sense that we were planning some trick."

"In that case he wouldn't return," agreed Bharak. "But if we weighted one of our spears, could we not attach a line from it to the kill, so the Striped One would bring it down upon himself . . .?"

"How many times does a trap of that sort work?" asked Gundar, with a hint of irritation. "No, Bharak, traps might work on smaller beasts, or on less cunning ones, but a trap which will catch the Striped Ones, especially those that have become filled with an evil spirit, hasn't yet been invented."

Bharak looked at the ground. "You're right, of course," he agreed reluctantly, since he knew that the big cats can seldom be tricked, even by professional hunters.

"Mine is the only way," repeated Gundar. "And it won't be so dangerous," he added reassuringly. "There's a bough of the tree which juts right out over the kill. . . ."

"I remember it," said Bharak.

"If I wait there I'll be able to drive my spear between his shoulders as he feeds."

It sounded simple and it was the only way, but Gundar was under no illusions about what would happen if he failed with that first crippling blow, as the branch was a bare ten feet above the ground.

"We'll wait together," said Bharak for the second time. "With two spears in him even the Striped One will find it hard to fight."

"No, Bharak." Gundar's tone was firm. "There isn't room for two on the branch. We'd get in each other's way. You must wait on a higher branch and keep your spear. Then, if the Striped One gets into the tree, we'll still be able to defend ourselves."

"So be it." Bharak sounded reluctant, but he understood the wisdom of his cousin's words.

Gundar looked out over the river, broken now into shallow, lily-covered pools and gently flowing rivulets among sandbanks and reed beds. The silence filled him with a feeling of peace, although he found himself wondering if he would live to see it all again.

He tried to banish such thoughts, however, and consoled himself with the knowledge that at least Bharak would be in a safer position. If things went wrong and the tiger did get into the tree then his cousin, being higher, would have time to retreat to the thinner branches where the man-eater could not follow because of its weight. That way, Bharak might be able to keep beyond the reach of its claws. . . .

"Gundar, suppose the evil one sees us before you can strike?"

"The Striped Ones hardly ever look up," said Gundar. "Why should they? They don't catch their food in the trees and they've nothing to fear from above."

After that both boys fell silent. Gundar tried to rest, but he was too keyed up by the prospect of what might happen, and so he watched the river instead.

Far out a sudden flash of silver and a rippling of the surface marked the spot where some small fish had jumped to escape the pitiless jaws of an unseen marauder. Overhead, a pair of hoarse-voiced rollers soared and plunged, fluttering and somersaulting in the wild, blue-winged beauty of their display flight. Gundar could hear Khan, grazing contentedly nearby, and from somewhere in the distance sounded the harsh roaring and cackling of hornbills.

It was all very peaceful. But Gundar had a job to do and now that he had made his decision, his own stubborn pride would force him to go through with it, whatever the

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consequences. And so, as the sun vanished behind the curtain of clouds in the west and the evening chorus of frogs began, he took a firmer grip on his spear and rose to his feet.

"What about Khan?" Bharak glanced at the young buffalo ambling behind them.

"Let him come," said Gundar.

They found the carcass just as they had left it. The covering of leaves and twigs had proved effective and Gundar felt certain the tiger would return. Why else would it have gone to the trouble of concealing its kill? The more he thought about it the more convinced he became that they would see the man-eater that night, and a thrill of fear ran through him as he climbed quietly into the branches of the bauhinia tree.

"May good fortune be with you," murmured Bharak softly as he climbed on past Gundar.

"And with you, Bharak."

Scrambling out on to the overhanging bough, Gundar braced his feet against a lower branch and pulled a screen of leafy twigs about him, making certain he could not be seen. Khan had remained upwind of the kill. The tiger would almost certainly come from the opposite direction and Gundar knew the buffalo would be safer there. His scent would not disturb the man-eater, and if the beast should break the rules and come in from the opposite direction, then Khan would be there to give them warning. The lame bull was not tied, as Gundar wanted him to be free to escape or at least to defend himself should things go wrong.

With his few simple preparations complete, Gundar settled down to wait, his spear at the ready, point downward in front of him. And before long he discovered that this was going to be by far the worst part of the whole business. He had to sit absolutely still, as a tiger, unlike many animals

of the jungle, possesses excellent eyesight as well as hearing. Although, normally, it would not be watching the trees, any slight movement on his own or Bharak's part would be enough to draw the brute's attention and make it suspicious if it happened to be nearby—and they did not know when it would return.

Gundar felt very small, sitting among the branches, and he desperately wanted to get it over and done with, whatever the result, as he knew that if he had long to wait his resolve might weaken and he would be too afraid to do the job at all. He thought of Bharak, and felt sure his cousin must be feeling the same.

The last of the daylight ebbed swiftly away. The moon, not quite halfway to the full, had already topped the surrounding trees and would soon shine full on the clump of bamboo. Gundar glanced across at Khan, who stood quietly between the trees a hundred yards away. He was quite at ease and Gundar knew the tiger could not be near. But he did not relax his own vigilance as he was aware that Khan would not scent the man-eater if it came from the expected direction. He was too far away and the slight breeze was in the wrong direction.

The minutes passed and to Gundar each seemed like an hour. A slight rustling of the leaves behind made him long to turn around. But he took a grip on himself and froze, rigid as the tree in which he crouched. Had the tiger come? He dared not look back as it would surely see him. He glanced across toward Khan. But he could no longer see the young bull.

The nape of his neck began to prickle and cold beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. He wished he could join Bharak, higher up in the tree. The sound came again, a crackling of dry leaves much closer than before. Gundar

frowned. Tigers did not usually make so much noise.

A twig snapped with a crack like a pistol shot. Startled, Gundar half-turned his head. The creature behind him was no tiger, but a bear, and he found himself trembling, half in relief and half in fear. He wiped his wet and sticky hands, and noticed suddenly how tense he had become.

"This won't do," he told himself fiercely. "I shall never kill the Striped One while I am so afraid."

He looked at the shadowy bulk of the bear and wished it would go away, as bears are the most unpredictable of all wild creatures. And he knew the tree would be no obstacle. He had often seen bears high among the branches when the fruit was ripe.

However, this was no fruit tree and the beast could not get either his scent or Bharak's. They were too high up for that and it passed over the bear's head. It did not find the tiger's kill, either, as it was on the upwind side and some distance away.

"Go away—please go away," breathed Gundar, willing the bear to move on.

But the bear did not go. Instead, it froze suddenly, cowering down in the shadows of a bramble thicket. Gundar felt his muscles tighten again. The bear had heard or scented something. Perhaps this time it really was the tiger. He forced himself to keep calm and still.

17

Trail of Terror

Seconds passed. And then, far off, Gundar heard a tremendous crashing of the undergrowth and relaxed again. No tiger would make so much commotion, but for the life of him he could think of no animal that would. Whatever it was, it had obviously frightened the bear, which cowered in its bramble patch.

He turned his head slowly in the direction of the sound. He wondered where Khan was. He still could not see the lame bull and he had made no sound for a long time. But that did not surprise Gundar as he was certain Khan would stay clear of the bear. Neither could he see Bharak, hidden among the foliage higher up in the tree.

But the racket in the forest was puzzling. "It must be something big," he muttered, "or it couldn't make so much noise."

Then he saw what it was. A wild boar, almost exhausted, burst from the trees. And only yards behind it, strung out in a line, came a pack of wild dogs. There were nine of them—big, dark red brutes—and Gundar knew the boar was doomed, as these dogs, like the wolves of the north, are the

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scourge of the Indian jungle. No animal, not even the tiger, is safe from them.

The chase passed on and out of his sight. But for a long time Gundar could hear its crashing progress, and once he heard the shrill, yelping scream of a dog. Evidently the valiant old boar had turned at bay and its slashing tusks had finished the career of one of its tormentors. It might kill two or even three before it died, reflected Gundar, but die it would, in the end, as the chosen victims of wild dogs always did.

The noise died away and he settled down again to his long vigil. He wondered how Bharak was feeling, but he had no means of communicating with his cousin. The bear disappeared, and a little while later Gundar saw Khan again. A feeling of relief swept over him at sight of the lame buffalo. He had been afraid the animal might wander downwind, and if the tiger should be on its way. . . .

Gundar thrust aside such thoughts. From then on he kept his eye on Khan. He could do that without turning his head and without losing sight of the chital. But time passed and the young bull showed no sign of alarm.

The night seemed very quiet now after what had gone before, and still the tiger did not come. Gundar knew, of course, why all other creatures had deserted that particular locality. It was because of the wild dogs. The area must be packed with game after the fire on the other side of the river, but every creature which had seen or heard the old boar's end would get away from the place as fast as it could.

As the hours slipped by and the man-eater did not appear, Gundar began to wonder if it, too, had been scared away by the dogs.

Perhaps it was close by at the time, he mused. He had no means of knowing.

The moon had passed its zenith and was slipping down behind the trees, its light lifting away from the chital's carcass and leaving it in darkness, except for the drifting, flashing light of fireflies. An owl floated past.

Silent and still, Gundar waited. He had long since ceased to be startled by every sound and movement, but he was stiff and cramped. He tried to stretch his limbs and ease some life back into them, since if the man-eater did come he would have to move fast—very fast.

The haze from the fire had settled and he could see, between the trees ahead, the snow-capped peak of a distant mountain, luminous and startlingly white in the last rays of the setting moon. But soon the light faded and there was nothing but the bejewelled velvet of the sky and a faint gleam where the mountain stood.

This was the dark time before dawn and if the tiger was going to return it would come within the next hour. Gundar found himself becoming nervous again. He could only just make out the kill, lying in the deep shade of the bamboo clump. He could no longer see Khan, black against the deeper shadow of the trees, and he realized it would be a bad time for him to tackle the man-eater.

But the tiger did not approach. Gundar waited, his heart thumping at every sound, but nothing happened.

The first red jungle cocks crowed, heralding the dawn, and the mountain top flushed pink. Babblers and rollers, orioles and finches, mynahs, hornbills, weavers, tailor birds and a host of others added their voices to the chorus, while a bulbul and a pair of brilliant scarlet minivets called cheerfully from some nearby trees and green parakeets screamed overhead.

Gundar climbed down from the tree and stretched his aching limbs. It was obvious that the tiger would not come

now, so there was no point in waiting any longer.

A moment later Bharak joined him on the ground. "It's good to be out of there," he said in relief. "I never knew a tree could be so uncomfortable."

"It wasn't pleasant," agreed Gundar. "But why did the Striped One not come? Did he suspect we were there, I wonder?"

"I shouldn't think so," said Bharak. "We made no sound. We were well hidden and he couldn't have scented us—none of those other creatures did."

"Maybe he heard the wild dogs."

"That's more likely," replied Bharak. "Or he might simply have changed his mind."

Gundar nodded. Usually, the tiger never returned to a human kill, but he had hoped the chital would be different. "We must try again," he murmured, and the two boys rejoined Khan and walked away toward the river. "Perhaps next time we'll be more fortunate."

And Gundar and Bharak did try again—they tried every day for more than two weeks. But bad luck dogged them all the time. Four times they found kills made by the man-eater. Two of them were small animals which had been devoured at one meal; the third was a cow which had strayed from some village herd. The tiger had eaten its fill and left the remains for the vultures and jackals. Gundar knew the great cat would not return to that particular kill, so he and Bharak, too, left it for the scavengers.

The fourth was the unluckiest one of all. The victim in this case was a goral, one of the little, long haired goat antelopes of the Himalayan foothills, and it had been covered by the tiger—a sure indication that it meant to return. The two boys duly made their preparations to spend the night in an overhanging tree—only to find that it was already occu-

pied by a colony of hornets. In climbing the trunk Gundar disturbed their nest, and only a swift plunge into the nearby river saved him from being severely stung.

In all this time they dared not sleep on the ground, even in the daytime. The man-eater had, for the time being, gone back to its normal diet of wild game. But they had no idea when the beast would revert to the killing of humans, and Gundar and Bharak had no intention of offering themselves as victims. So they slept in the branches of some isolated tree with Khan tethered below to give them warning if the tiger should approach.

In this way, they kept close behind the man-eater as it worked its way along the Khada River Valley toward their own village at the upper end. And all the time the clouds of the monsoon were drawing nearer across the plains below.

Both boys' fear of the tiger had gradually lessened as the days passed, but they dreaded the onset of the monsoon.

"When the rains come the wild game will disperse," said Gundar one day. "And when that happens the Striped One will no longer be able to kill so easily."

"Then he will go back to the killing of men." Bharak's tone was worried.

"And become bolder than ever," declared his cousin. "If we don't catch him soon. . . ."

There was no need for Gundar to finish the sentence. But the days slipped by and still the tiger eluded them.

And then, early one evening, when they were encamped near the banks of the Khada only a few miles from home, Bharak glanced up miserably at the threatening mass of clouds piling overhead. "The monsoon will break tonight," he prophesied.

The weather over the past few days had been working up

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to a sticky, torrid climax and the heat that evening was almost unbearable. The boys could hear thunder rumbling in the distance, moving steadily closer.

"We'd better find shelter," muttered Gundar.

"Those rocks over there." Bharak pointed, and the two boys made their way to a jumbled pile of boulders heaped among the trees at the foot of a steep slope, well back from the river.

"This will have to do," said Gundar. "We won't find a better place."

"I have some fruit," said Bharak. "Let's eat."

"Thanks," Gundar took the half of the wild dillenia fruit which his cousin offered and settled back in readiness for the storm which they knew must come.

And come it did, within the hour. Dusk was closing in—a premature dusk, brightened by the flicker of lightning. Gundar heard the wind sighing in the trees below their shelter as the storm moved up from the plains, and he and Bharak crept deeper into the shallow cave, beside Khan.

The sound grew to a rushing roar and then it was all around them, lashing the trees and ripping off branches. The tearing crash and boom of thunder shook the very rocks under which they crouched and Gundar could feel Khan shivering in terror beside him.

He glanced up at the young bull. "It won't last long," he whispered soothingly, and hoped he was right.

"It's a bad storm," muttered Bharak beside him.

Lightning flared and the rain began. The cave gave little shelter and within seconds the two boys and Khan were soaked and the earthen floor had turned to mud. The rain changed to hail and the sting of it was like the lash of a whip.

Holding their blankets in front of them Gundar and

Bharak crouched in the farthest corner of the cave, with Khan pressed close between them. The din was appalling. Hail rattled on the rocks, drowning the roar of the wind and battering out all but the loudest cracks of thunder.

A tree disintegrated in a flash of blue flame and showering sparks. Gundar caught the sharp tang of burning wood and sulphur, then the rain and hail flattened and swamped the charred remains.

The hail stopped, giving way to more rain—torrential rain which drove at the ground like so many steel blue shafts, illuminated by the incessant lightning, and rebounded again in a hissing spray.

"The river's rising," Gundar had to shout to make himself heard.

Bharak nodded. One by one, the sand bars were disappearing; the rivulets and pools were widening and coming together in a seething brown flood as the storm swept on into the hills.

And then it was all over. The wind dropped, the thunder died away to a rumbling boom and the rain eased. Gundar moved out of the cave. It was quite dark, although the distant flicker of lightning did much to relieve the gloom. He looked about him.

"The Striped One will be out on a night like this," he remarked as Bharak joined him.

"We can't stay here," said his cousin.

"The semul will be a good place to spend the night." Gundar pointed to a stout, buttressed silk-cotton tree.

Bharak groaned. "It won't be very pleasant in this weather," he complained.

Gundar smiled. "We'll be lacking in more than comfort if the Striped One finds us on the ground at night. And the rain may stop."

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But the rain did not stop. It kept on in a steady downpour and Gundar and Bharak spent a miserable night crouching amid the dripping branches and fingered leaves of the silk-cotton tree. They dared not sleep, as Gundar feared that Khan, with his senses dulled by the steady swish and patter of the rain, would have little chance of hearing or scenting the tiger if it came.

But the night passed at last and with dawn the sun broke through. The Khada was still rising, and it would go on doing so throughout the wet and stormy weeks of the monsoon. Climbing down from the tree, Gundar and Bharak forced a path through the wet grass to the river's edge. The rain had brought out the leeches, always a nuisance in the wet season, and the two boys were glad to get on to the firm, glistening sand where they could be more or less free of the pests.

They could not make a fire as there was not a dry stick to be found, but it did not matter since the day was hot. And they still had dried meat from the sambar Gundar had killed and some chapatis, made on the previous day from flour given them by Dara Chand. They breakfasted on these and some wild fruit they were able to gather.

Throughout that morning they stayed at the riverside, letting Khan graze in the rich grassy meadows. It would be no use looking for the man-eater's trail until it moved from cover that evening, as the rain would have washed out any sign of tracks made during the night and the boys agreed that the tiger was unlikely to venture far in broad daylight.

So they waited. But as the sun began to dip toward the west, Gundar called Khan and the trio set off along the remaining sandbanks, not yet covered by the swirling flood water.

And they had not gone very far before Gundar came to a

standstill. "Look!" He pointed to a black, red-wattled vulture which circled overhead.

"What of it?" Bharak was puzzled.

"Let's find out what it's seen," returned Gundar, and hurried toward the spot.

"A wild pig—nothing more," said Bharak. "Caught in the floods and drowned before it could escape."

Gundar nodded, his eyes gleaming. That kind of thing always happened when sudden storms occurred higher up in the hills where the waters of the river were confined inside narrow gorges.

"The Striped Ones are fond of pork," he mused.

Bharak caught his breath, "And the evil one will know the river is in flood."

"He will," said Gundar. "He'll also know there's a chance of finding food here at such a time as this."

Bharak looked thoughtfully at the carcass of the pig. "The Striped One is old. He must have come by a good many easy meals of this kind in his time," he remarked.

"Almost certainly he'll come down to the river after dark," replied Gundar. "And it may be that his nose will lead him to this pig."

"But how can we watch over it?" protested Bharak. "It's right out in the open."

"Khan will help us."

Swiftly, Gundar chased away the vulture and looped one end of the lame buffalo's plaited grass tether around the leg of the pig, taking care not to touch the carcass with his hands, as he did not wish to taint it with his human scent. The other end of the rope he fastened to Khan's horns. Snorting his disgust, the young bull backed away. He did not like the smell of death which hung in the air. But walking beside him and talking soothingly, Gundar finally persuaded him

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to drag the pig into some long grass under a group of acacia trees.

Khan bellowed his relief when his young master freed the rope, and limped away to watch from a distance as he and Bharak raked a few leaves over the carcass.

"That will do." Gundar stood back.

"Let's hope the Striped One will find it," murmured Bharak.

There was still more than an hour before sunset as Gundar arranged the delicate fernlike leaves of the acacia around him, and he sighed, wondering how many more nights he and the long-suffering Bharak would have to spend in trees. Many times while sitting up he had wondered whether it was worth it—whether it would not be better simply to return to the village and face the wrath of his father and the others. But each time, his fierce pride had prevented him from taking such a course. It was the easy way out, he told himself. And as the days passed he grew more and more resigned to the task he had set for himself, until he had become so inured to it that he had almost lost his fear of the man-eater. All he wanted was to meet up with the beast and settle the matter. The outcome scarcely concerned him. What did count was that his pride should be satisfied. He would have repaid the debt which he felt he owed to the people of his village.

It was in this frame of mind that he waited, with Khan in his usual position some distance away on the upwind side. The time before darkness passed and the sun went down in the spectacular blaze of crimson and gold and purple so typical of Indian sunsets in the monsoon season. The evening chorus of jackals began and Gundar hoped they would not locate the carcass too soon. But they were a long way off and he heard their calls dying away in the distance beyond Khan.

An hour passed, two hours, and clouds scudded across the

sky. A stiff breeze rustled the leaves of the tree in which he and Bharak crouched and a scurry of rain whipped by. Then it stopped and the moon appeared. Gundar thought he saw a movement in the grass below him. It came again—a slight rippling of the long tawny blades.

Hardly daring to breathe, he watched the place. Was it the tiger? He had not heard it come but the noise of the rain on the leaves would account for that. Whatever it was, it was in no hurry, as it waited a long time before moving the last few feet to the pig's carcass.

Birth of a Legend

Gundar gripped his spear, tensing for the swift downward lunge as the animal moved again. And then he relaxed, a wave of disappointment, not unmingled with relief, passing through him. This was no tiger but a jungle cat. He could clearly see the small, lithe, grey-brown body and tufted ears as the cat slipped out into the shaft of moonlight and began to tear at the carcass.

The jungle cat stayed only for a few minutes, however, and vanished in such a hurry that Gundar felt certain the tiger must be on its way. And sure enough the grass beneath him was rippling again as some large animal slid through.

He ran his tongue over lips which had gone suddenly dry. His hands felt sticky on the shaft of his spear, but he dared not make even the small movement necessary to wipe them. The skin at the back of his neck prickled in fear and expectation. And then again came anti-climax as the dark shape of a black panther glided out from under the tree. Lithe, powerful and graceful, it slid round the carcass of the pig and settled on the opposite side, facing Gundar. For a moment, as he gazed down into the wide amber eyes, he felt

certain he must have been seen, since the beast was so close that he could make out the shadowy leopard's rosettes patterned like a watermark in the sleek black coat. But the panther was not suspicious. It began to feed while Gundar watched, motionless as the tree in which he crouched.

Undisturbed, the panther ate its fill and departed. And Gundar drew a deep breath of relief. He did not feel at all secure with such a creature only a few feet below his perch. He was anxious, too, about Khan. He had not seen the young bull for some time and he was afraid he might fall foul of the panther, since upwind as he was he could not have scented the cat.

"But surely no panther would dare to attack a bull as big as Khan," he reassured himself.

Actually, there was little to worry about, as the cat was not hungry and would not be likely to take risks. And the incident had served one good purpose; it had convinced Gundar of the efficiency of his plans. The panther had not suspected his presence, and it had been so close that he could have driven his spear down between its shoulder blades at almost any time while it was feeding. The tiger, if it came, would be in an equally vulnerable position.

But it was not to be. The rest of the night passed without a sign of the man-eater. Several times he heard the rasping, sawing snarls of panthers, and once he thought he heard the reverberating, booming roar of a tiger. The sound brought a pang of conscience as he thought about Khan, left to his own devices in the jungle. But he had heard no sound from the young buffalo.

It brought an even greater pang as Gundar thought about the people of his village, since he felt responsible for the man-eater's continued existence. He remembered Dara Chand's words: "It would have been a great sacrifice, but

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it could have meant the saving of many human lives."

With a heavy heart Gundar abandoned the pig to the vultures and the crows soon after sunrise, and he and Bharak went in search of Khan.

So the weeks lengthened into months and try as they would the two cousins could not come to grips with the man-eater. In fact, during all the time they had been in its territory, they had not so much as set eyes on the beast and they were beginning to despair of ever catching up with it.

"Those men in Marzabad spoke truly when they said the Striped One bears a charmed life," sighed Bharak one morning as he, Gundar and Khan rested under a tree by the side of the Khada, not far from the place where they came with the village herd, in the days which now seemed very far away.

Gundar nodded. "Many human lives has the evil one taken," he agreed. "And yet we have been in the jungle all this time and seen nothing more than his tracks."

Bharak sighed again. "How nice it would be to sleep on the ground again," he murmured.

Gundar glanced at him and noticed with a shock how tired and haggard he looked. And Bharak was not the only one. Sleeping in trees had been a considerable hardship even during the dry weather, and it was almost impossible since the monsoon had broken and the foliage was nearly always wet, even during those few days when it was not actually raining. It was fine at the moment, though, and he looked about him.

"The grass here is short and the rocks dry," he said quickly. "You must sleep for a while, Bharak, while I keep watch."

"But what about you?"

"I can take a turn later—if the rain holds off. Meanwhile you will be safe here if I take Khan up on to that rise over there." Gundar pointed. "The ground is open so I can see all

of the river bank from there and Khan will scent the Striped One if he comes."

"So be it," Bharak was too tired to argue. "But for two hours only."

Quietly Gundar rose to his feet and called Khan. The young buffalo followed as he climbed to the top of the low rise and paused there, scanning the river bank.

"Oh, why doesn't the Striped One show himself," he muttered again, fondling the lame bull's muzzle.

Khan nuzzled his shoulder and Gundar sat down with his back against a tree, idly watching the Khada, flowing fast and full the way it usually does in the monsoon season. A red jungle cock and several smaller brown babblers, jabbering among themselves as always, fed on the ground not far away, while in the tree above them a glossy black drongo perched, industriously mimicking every sound they made.

A green pigeon came dropping down to the branches over Gundar's head and a hornbill flew heavily past, dipping and flapping, the great casque on its bill silhouetted against the blue of the sky. Farther away, in an acacia tree by the river's edge, a pair of bee-eaters had settled, each in turn swooping away after some darting dragonfly and each a graceful, sharp-winged symphony in green and blue.

Insects hummed drowsily in the heavy air and Gundar was half-asleep when, far off in the forest, a chital barked its shrill alarm. He did not hear the call, nor did he hear the raucous coughing of a langur which followed immediately afterward. Khan heard the sounds though, and he moved in closer to his young master, instinctively seeking protection.

A peacock screamed, and still the boy heard nothing. Khan turned, staring toward the sound, his ears flicking and

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nostrils twitching. But it was a long way off. No scent of tiger or panther reached him, and taking comfort from the nearness of Gundar, he dropped his head again to feed.

An hour passed. The babblers and the drongo departed and no sound disturbed the stillness, except for the murmuring of the river and the drowsy buzz of insects. Gundar, worn out by the strain of the past weeks, was fast asleep, while Khan grazed peacefully at his feet. Neither was aware of the sinister shape gliding soundlessly toward them through the rippling green grass.

Slowly, very slowly, that shadowy form crept closer. Suddenly, Khan threw up his head, a low bellow of fear rumbling in his chest.

Gundar was on his feet in an instant. But even as he rose an icy terror gripped him. The tiger was already coming.

He threw up his arms in a futile effort to ward off the blow which he knew must come, his spear forgotten in that moment of panic. The grey-white mask and amber eyes of the man-eater loomed in front of his face, and he gave himself up for lost. He saw the widespread claws reaching for him, and the yellow fangs. And in the same split second the awful vision disappeared behind the bulk of Khan's shoulder as the lame buffalo lunged forward.

Gundar had a confused glimpse of Khan's horns, sweeping down and up again in that terrible thrust of the wild arna bull. He heard the thud as the horns drove home, and the tiger was hurled yards away by a powerful swing of the buffalo's neck.

It all happened in the space of a few seconds. But in that time Gundar had jerked himself out of the terror which held him. He snatched up his spear, as Khan had hit the tiger too far back. With a coughing roar of rage it was charging again, and he prepared to meet it with the butt of his

weapon braced against the ground as Dara Chand had shown him.

But Khan was there before him. The blood of the Old Warrior ran strong in his veins. This was his first taste of real battle and he had discovered his own mighty strength. The man-eater had yielded to one blow from his horns and he intended to kill it.

With a bellow of fury which drowned the tiger's roar, he swerved to meet the charge. But for all his great power he was lame. The cat had noticed it and was not intimidated.

The tiger sprang and Khan's head went down. But at the last instant the man-eater twisted aside. And, instead of impaling itself on the bull's razor-sharp horns, it came down in a sprawling heap across his shoulders.

Gundar winced as he saw it. Even as it landed the great cat was tearing and slashing with fangs and claws. He tried to get in a thrust with his spear, but despite his lameness Khan was moving so fast, the boy was afraid of striking the young bull by mistake. Finally, it was Khan himself who solved the problem. Panic-stricken and racked with pain, the buffalo stumbled suddenly. For an instant he staggered, fighting for balance, and then he was down.

The tiger leaped clear, dodging between Khan's hoofs, and in the same instant Gundar stabbed with all his strength. The spear struck home and the tiger whirled. Its sudden movement tore the weapon free and Gundar stabbed again as the man-eater sprang. The impact carried him backward and he lost his grip on the spear. But he saw its shaft snap as the tiger somersaulted and he braced himself for what seemed to be the end.

But that first terrible blow of Khan's was beginning to make itself felt. And Gundar's blade had stabbed the tiger full in the chest. It was weakening fast and its eyes were

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glazing as it reached Gundar. Desperately the boy threw up his arms, and felt a searing agony as the tiger's claws slashed into his shoulders and chest. Staggering, he went down again and lay where he had fallen, waiting for the final, fatal blow.

The blow did not come. Slowly, Gundar raised himself and looked around him. Vaguely, he was aware of Bharak bending over him, speaking to him, but he scarcely heard his cousin's words.

"It can't be true," he whispered, his eyes wide with wonder as they came to rest on the striped body of the man-eater sprawled beside him. "The Striped One is dead."

"The Striped One is no more," said Bharak. "But now, Gundar, I must get help. You'll be safe here and there's nothing I can do alone." Bharak rose to his feet and darted off.

Gundar watched him go and then his gaze turned toward Khan. The lame bull stood a few yards away, his black coat ripped and streaming with blood in a score of places. He was shaking from head to foot, and even as Gundar started toward him his legs buckled and he collapsed with a bellow of agony.

"Khan!"

His own injuries forgotten, Gundar sprang to the buffalo's side. But it was obvious, even before he reached him, that there was nothing he could do.

"Khan—oh, Khan," he whispered, dropping to his knees and fondling the dark, quivering muzzle.

With a final, tremendous effort Khan raised his head, but the shadow of death was already in his eyes as he looked up at Gundar. And then, with a lingering moan, he was gone.



Gundar was still there when Bharak returned with Kala Singh more than an hour later, still kneeling beside the body of Khan, with the tiger lying dead in the grass behind him. His uncle asked him no questions, and later Gundar could not remember being taken to his father's house.

The first thing he was aware of was his mother and Naida tending his wounds, and his father standing over him, leaning heavily on a stick. And then he remembered. . . .

"The Striped One . . ." he gasped, struggling up on to one elbow.

"The Striped One is dead," Raman Singh told him gently.

Gundar looked at the stick and recognized the marks of a tiger's claws on his father's bare arms. "Is that the work of the evil one?" he whispered.

Raman Singh nodded. "But he has paid in full," he replied. "And by my own son's hand."

"Father," Gundar hesitated. "You—you aren't angry with me? Or with Bharak? The fault was all mine—but he wouldn't let me go alone . . ." He finished the sentence in a rush, hardly daring to look at the older man. "I should never have taken Khan, but. . . ."

"You did wrong, Gundar," his mother said softly. "But we're not angry with you."

"It's so good to have you back, Gundar," added Naida happily. "And Bharak also."

"Your sister speaks truly," declared Raman Singh. "Now that I am crippled it will be your duty to look after your mother and Naida. And who better for such a task than a man who has hunted down and slain the Lord of the Jungle?"

"It wasn't I who slew the Striped One, Father, but Khan . . ." Gundar turned away. He could not trust himself to speak of his beloved young buffalo.

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"Khan won't be forgotten," Raman Singh told him gently and with pride. "His name will be known and remembered throughout these hills."

And so it was. In the years that followed, the name of Khan, the lame buffalo—son of the great wild arna—became a legend, a story destined to live on through the years, to be passed down from father to son wherever hillmen lived and worked.

And for Gundar and Bharak, Khan remained a vivid memory—a true king among buffaloes . . . and a worthy son of the Old Warrior, his father.